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Druids go 'public'

Local group adds weekly services to celebrate nature

By Stephanie Innes

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Spinning her robed body in dizzying circles and clutching a wooden wand called the staff of Dionysus, Dame Julian Greene chants, "Let the gates be opened," as her fellow Druids anticipate the nature spirits' arrival.

Greene, 49, is not an actress, nor is she a student of Harry Potter's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Rather, the Tucson administrator and former Christian pastor is a devout member of a local faith that takes itself as seriously as any other organized religion.

Druids are part of a faith called neo-paganism - a broad term that typically applies to a person who celebrates nature, usually someone who practices a form of worship that descends from the various religions that preceded Christianity.

"A lot of disaffected Christians turn to paganism," Greene explains after invoking the nature deities during a recent Saturday morning worship service with the local Sonoran Sunrise Grove of Druids, which has about 30 members and is attracting a growing number of curious spectators to its eight yearly festivals.

The Tucson "grove" - a grove is the Druid equivalent of a congregation - is part of the international Ár nDraíocht Féin organization. Ár nDraíocht Féin, pronounced *arn ree-ocht fane*, is Irish for "our own Druidry" and like other members around the world, the Tucson grove is promoting more "public Druidry."

The local Druid grove, founded in 1999, last month added weekly worship services in addition to its annual neo-pagan festivals that celebrate the cycles of nature. The eight festivals include such occasions as solstices, as well as the well-known Druid new-year festival, Samhain - the end of warm season.

Other neo-pagans include shamans, Wiccans and a group of goddess worshippers called odinists. Greene describes Druids as the "high Episco- pagans" of pre-Christianity because of their thirst for theological study, though unlike Christians they do not rely on a specific text like the Bible.

All Sonoran Sunrise Grove rituals take place in an elaborate 27-foot-wide stone circle on a property called "Summerlands" on the far East Side that was modeled after England's famous Avebury ancient stone circle. Like Avebury and Stonehenge, the circle at Summerlands reflects the astronomical course of the sun and has altars that coincide with sunrise on the summer and winter equinoxes.

The circle is surrounded by 12 large stones with an altar, oak tree, well and fire pit inside. Around the perimeter are shrines to such Celtic deities as Brigid, Cernunnos and Rhiannon.

"Summerlands is what we call the land of the dead. It's the happy place you go when you die - a place sometimes also called Avalon or the Isle of Apples," says Kirk Thomas, 52, a retired investor and hospice volunteer who owns the local Summerlands property with his partner, Steve Sampson.

Thomas, who has been in Tucson for three years, built the stone circle at Summerlands as his own private Druid chapel but opened it up to the local grove when he learned it had no worship space.

Ultimately, the grove would like to secure a piece of land and build a stone circle that is larger and seats more people than Thomas' circle, which was built to comfortably hold 40 people.

Most American neo-pagans are Wiccan, according to Helen Berger, a professor of sociology at West Chester University of Pennsylvania and a co-author of "Voices From the Pagan Census." During her research, Berger says she found Druids to be "basically nice, liberal people," who, like other neo-pagans, are as a group well-educated, embracing of diversity and environmentally conscious.

Berger, who says the number of American neo-pagans is growing, estimates between 200,000 and 250,000 neo-pagans live in the United States.

About 9.4 percent of the country's neo-pagans - somewhere between 18,000 and 24,000 Americans - are Druid, Berger says, though she emphasizes the numbers are estimates because neo-pagans as a group have no umbrella governing organization, and many worship individually.

Most neo-pagans live in California and New England, Berger says. Her data show about 8 percent of the country's neo-pagans live in the mountain region, which includes Arizona.

Sonoran Sunrise Grove Druids come from a variety of faith backgrounds. Thomas describes his background as spiritual but not religious.

Grove co-founder David I. Foster, 48, grew up as a United Methodist, while member Juliet R. Bresler, 29, grew up in Scotland learning Druidry from her grandmother.

Greene, an Iowa native, became a Druid slightly more than a year ago after a career as an evangelical Christian minister for the Church of the Nazarene.

Neo-pagans maintain a sense of humor about perceptions of their worship style and polytheistic beliefs. They do not proselytize, nor do they believe their faith is the only route to a happy afterlife. Thomas' partner practices Buddhism, and Greene's husband is Roman Catholic.

"I don't have a problem that he's Catholic, and he doesn't have a problem with me," Greene said.

"He tells people our roses are so beautiful because of all the mojo I do in the back yard."

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