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## Italian-American Hindu educates others about religion

TERRI FINCH HAMILTON  
Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS — You might hear Fred Stella on the radio, interviewing an atheist. You might see him on TV in a commercial for The Soaring Eagle Casino.

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Or dancing and chanting in a Hindu celebration in the grassy backyard of a house on the West Side.

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If you order a singing telegram to surprise your boss, Stella is the guy who sends Elvis over.

The guy is all over the place.

“I didn’t sit in my bedroom as a kid and think, ‘Boy, wouldn’t it be great if I could own a singing telegram service and be president of an interfaith dialogue association and act and teach yoga,” Stella says.



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He smiles.



“It just happened that way.”

Stella, 52, is an Italian-American Hindu whose passion is educating others about religion. All religions.

President of the Interfaith Dialogue Association, he’s the guy you call if you’d like someone to speak to your group or school about Judaism or Buddhism or Sikh.

“It would be easier to list the ones we couldn’t provide,” Stella says. “We are your one-stop shopping for all your spiritual needs.

“If they want Christian, they could probably just call their neighbor next door,” he says.

Or maybe not. Which is the whole point.

“It used to be easy to dismiss other religions because all those heathens were ‘over there’ somewhere — not in West Michigan,” Stella says. “Now people are saying, ‘Wait a minute — they’re among us. We need to know about them.’”

“He wants people to talk about their faith from a personal perspective — not a textbook perspective,” says Lisa Mitchell, a director at the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism who has known Stella for 13 years. “He makes it easy to share.

There’s an openness about him. His passion is for people to have an understanding of each other.”

Get to know him and you realize there’s a lot going on.

He’s a thrifty guy who hoards rubber bands, drives a 1998 Nissan and works out on his porch with dilapidated weights taped together. He loves a free meal.

He can talk for hours about his beloved Beatles. This will be his 37th year volunteering at a summer camp for adults with muscular dystrophy. He teaches yoga at Muskegon Community College. He models.

He spends three hours a week in seclusion, meditating.

He’s also an Italian Catholic kid from Detroit who turned out to be Hindu.

“If they’re Christian, the first thing people want to know is why I became Hindu,” Stella says. “I give them the same line I used to give women I was breaking up with when I was single: ‘It’s not you — it’s me.’”

“I really respect the Christian tradition,” he says. “But to me, this belief system made more sense.”

He talks of the concept of divinity and its relationship to the person, the practice of meditation, service, devotion.

Stella grew up in Detroit, with his parents, Fred and Jene, and a brother, Mark. His dad passed away in 1982. His mom now lives in Ada.

His dad helped run the family business, Stella Products, a restaurant equipment and design company. Stella and many his cousins worked there during summers.

After earning a degree in mass communications from the University of Detroit and a few years working in Detroit radio, he came to Grand Rapids in 1980 for a job in talk radio.

His voice often pays the bills.

He’s the voice on several books on tape and the corporate spokesman for Global Forex Trading, based in Ada. You can hear him on the company’s Web site delivering a little lesson on foreign currency trading.

He’s not a 9-to-5 kind of guy, but earns a living in bits and pieces. One piece is Grand Rapids Singing Telegram, which he bought in 1983 from some friends who were moving.

Stella can send over Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, The Grim Reaper, The Nerd or 16 Hawaiian dancers for your luau party.

Stella often is at WGUV studios downtown taping a segment for his weekly radio show, "Common Threads," sponsored by the Interfaith Dialogue Association. It airs Sundays at 7 a.m. and repeats at 3:30 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m. Tuesdays on WGUV radio AM 1480.

**STORYCHAT** 

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