

*Tashirat is an extraordinary community that has chosen parenting as a spiritual path: The seven*

## MY RETREAT TO A Mountain ASHRAM

By KRISTIN BARENSEN

Eight figures dressed in white, we sit in meditation on a red rooftop overlooking the volcanic mountains of Tepoztlán

as the sun sinks behind them and black clouds gather force. A bolt of lightning splits the sky—its thundercrack a second behind—and everything goes dark. We scurry inside and light candles. As we resume our cross-legged positions, a fearful wail rises from little Angie downstairs, and her adoptive mother leaves us to comfort her with Spanish words.

Here in Tashirat (pronounced Ta-SHEE-rat), an ashram in the mountains south of Mexico City, yoga begins the day and meditation ends it. I find my way along winding paths toward my glass octagon. Inside, rain is sprinkling through the thatched straw roof. I continue my meditation in the dark, thrilled by the close cracks of lightning, feeling a curious fullness. Tashirat is a small community with huge aspirations to serve humanity. At the time of my visit, seven international staff members are raising 17 Mexican children who were abandoned by their parents or removed from abusive situations such as beatings, child labor, even sexual trafficking. What started as a simple service project has evolved into a profound lesson in parenting as a spiritual path. >>

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*residential staff share a deep dedication. I admire them and wonder: Would it be for me?*





**TASHIRAT:** Red-roofed bungalows (left) are home to seven staff: (above, from front left) Karly (Kaisha), Ashanya, Oriana; (back) Thi'ara, Arista, Zayan; and (not pictured) Artimia.

When I awoken the next morning, nature surrounds me: Bright red tanagers tease the windows; rain-soaked irises sprout beneath the tangle of dried-up trees and bramble. The cicadas are out in force, creating a high vibrational backdrop that is somehow an “Om.” This is how I come to see Tashirat during my weeklong stay in summer, 2007—an oasis in a desert, a wellspring of generosity at a critical point in the history of humankind.

#### PLANTING THE SEEDS

In the early '90s, South African yoga teacher Brenda Jacobsen de Godoy and her husband, Mexican yoga student and businessman Roberto Godoy, founded a Sivananda center in Mexico City. But the city's unparalleled smog soon chased the couple south with their two young children, Karly and Jonathan, and Brenda began attending meditation sessions in Tepoztlán.

In some respects, Tepoztlán is quintessentially Mexican, with fiestas almost daily and fireworks at dawn. But Tepoztlán is also the mythical birthplace of the Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec feathered serpent god. A small pyramid stands watch from atop a range of otherworldly volcanic rock formations. Sightings of UFOs, in the form of orange orbs, are regularly reported. Crystal shops, health food stores, and New Age art galleries line the cobblestone streets.

Brenda envisioned creating a center there with three aspects: an ashram for spiritual practice, an educational center for children, and a health institute. Roberto purchased land near Tepoztlán and had four octagonal bungalows built. In 1995, the couple founded the ashram and called it “Tashirat,” a composite word standing for “truth, love, and life.”

Brenda took the spiritual name “Artimia Arian,” a convention that future staff members would follow, though taking a first name only. Artimia offered free yoga classes and meditation sessions to the public (a tradition that continues today), and she launched educational projects with special-needs kids in local schools. Word spread and people began to come, first as yoga students and then as residents. Melissa Rodgers (Thi'ara), 31, from Rhode Island, was among the first. “I had no idea what [Tashirat] was going to become,” Thi'ara says. “Back then it was just a couple people doing service projects and meditation.” But one by one, Tashirat's ranks grew; today, all seven resident staff members are veterans of over five years.\*

Artimia and Roberto divorced in 2001. Roberto lives just down the road in the picturesque resort he built, Jardin del Sol, from where the music of mariachis and the Village People wafts upwind on Saturday nights. He frequently sends

clients to Tashirat's retreat facility. His daughter from a previous marriage, Marisa Godoy, who was a key staff member for eight years, has recently moved to Los Angeles to teach yoga and fund-raise for the ashram.

#### ADOPTING A NEW APPROACH

Artimia's daughter, Karly (Kaisha), 20, now a staff member, recalls Tashirat's early projects with the schools, which were located in poverty-plagued areas. “We would see huge transformations with the kids during the week, but many would go home to abuse and alcoholism and lose all the progress they had made,” Kaisha says. “We saw that the root cause of their problems was the home.” Staff realized they could make a much greater impact by giving a loving and healthy home to kids who didn't have a home at all—orphans.

In 2003, Tashirat accepted its first group of orphans from the Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF), the child welfare agency of the Mexican government, which manages orphanages nationwide. At the DIF's insistence, Tashirat had two large buildings constructed to serve as an official orphanage. Staff and kids moved in, but the kids were wild *en masse* and the setting felt institutional,

*\*All data, including ages, reflect Tashirat as of mid-2007.*

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{ THE SEVEN TASHIRAT STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES IN SUMMER 2007 }

*I have the privilege of sharing lunch and dinner with a different family each day, bringing little toys as offerings and trying to win the affections of the children as they try to win mine. For some kids, it's a tall order to share their parents' attention with a visitor who speaks incessantly in English, but many chat and play with me, and all are cute and endearing in their own ways. (The bilingual staff speak mostly Spanish to the kids, while gradually teaching them English.)*

**KAISHA'S FAMILY: Chris, Julio, Melina, and Tania**

Kaisha, wise beyond her 20 years, is petite like her mother, Artimia, and a flexible yogini. While growing up at Tashirat, she had pictured herself living as a dancer in New York—until she joined her then-boyfriend (now husband, see page 4) Chris Mezera on a long visit. “Parts of that life were amazing and happy and beautiful, but mostly it was lonely,” she recalls. “People didn’t share my values. I started really appreciating Tashirat.” In 2005, she returned and signed on as an official staff member.

As Chris, 31, tells it, “When Kaisha informed me of her decision, from that day my life changed.” If he wanted to continue their relationship—and he did—he too had to accept Tashirat as home. A frequent visitor, “I had a bond with this place, but it was the complete opposite of my life,” says Chris, who is an entrepreneur and a musician in an indie rock band.

Meanwhile, every time Artimia visited the DIF orphanage in nearby Cuernavaca, little Julio would beg her, “Please, take me with you; I’ll be a good boy.” He had lived at the DIF for all of his seven years, along with hundreds of other kids. “The older kids steal presents from the little kids,” he tells me in good English. “They used to punch us if we didn’t give them our presents.” If he didn’t fold his clothes, the workers “would hit me on the *torta* [bottom] and grab me by the hair and ears. They were treating us bad. I wanted to come here. I wanted to go away of the DIF. I didn’t know if Tashirat was a good place or not.”

The Tashirat community accepted Julio, and he and Chris soon bonded. “I picked him,” Julio says, hugging Chris. “We

became friends right away,” Chris agrees. At around the same time, Kaisha took on Melina as her daughter, and the four came together as a family. “When you know you’re someone’s dad, or someone’s husband, you don’t question it,” Chris says. “The deeper my devotion grows with Kaisha and the kids, the more connected with spiritual life I become.” Julio and Melina are both 10, and their adoptive sister, Tania, is 7. Chris has gradually transitioned to living full-time at Tashirat, and intends to become staff as soon as possible.

**ZAYAN'S FAMILY: Blanca, Marco, Maribel, and Sami**

Zayan’s adopted daughter, Maribel (13), Julio’s biological sister, is bright and funny but defiant, constantly rebelling against 30-year-old Zayan’s authority. During my visit, their conflict came to a crisis point, and Maribel’s attitude seemed to turn around. “This is where the commitment counts,” Zayan says. “It’s like a marriage. If you’re committed only when it’s easy, that’s not enough.” Zayan also parents Blanca (14), Marco (13), and Sami (9), so he is not generalizing from just one experience. Zayan continues, “Friends back in Ireland ask if I will leave Tashirat once the children turn 18. But I’m not considering leaving. The idea is to stay here forever and give the kids a home to come back to.” >>



**FAMILIES** Left: Kaisha and Chris with (clockwise from top) Tania, Julio, Melina. Center: Zayan with Marco, Blanca, Maribel, Sami. Right: Tania in the garden.



**ARTIMIA'S FAMILY: Jonathan and David**

Artimia, 50, is small in stature but large in personality and energy; she is the kind of person who makes unlikely things happen. She spends most of her day in silence, meditating and writing in the second story of her octagonal home. It's furnished with only a thin mattress, a laptop, and a stack of books on alternative medicine. Artimia, both guide and grandma, steers the community from behind the scenes, while decisions are made by democratic vote.

About the adoption project, Artimia says, "We didn't realize how much of a life lesson parenting was and how incorrectly it's done on earth. It opened up a bag of worms for everyone—issues of how they were raised. People who seemed to have a lot of love didn't at first when they became parents. But they transformed." Artimia lives with her birth son, Jonathan, and adopted son, David.

**ASHANYA'S FAMILY: Carlos, Cristian, Julito, and Angie**

When Tashirat took in Carlos, he had his choice of parents. "The first time I came, I really liked Ashanya," says Carlos, who is Melina's brother and the ashram's oldest kid at 17. He joined the family of Esther Bissinger (Ashanya), 28, from Philadelphia, who was already parenting Cristian (14), Julito (5), and Angie (4). The arrangement worked.

Still, Carlos held a lot of resentment toward his biological mother, who had abused and neglected her kids, and he had a difficult time accepting Ashanya in the role of new mother. Says Ashanya, "I told Carlos, if you want a mom, I will be that person for you, forever. If you don't want a home, that's okay, too." Carlos had a cathartic meeting with his biological mother that helped him to release some of his anger. After this, he was able to call Ashanya "Mom."

**ORIANA'S FAMILY: Yola, Lianna, and Aria**

Lauren Danella (Oriana), 28, originally from Philadelphia, first visited Tashirat as a student in 2001 and returned the following year to join the staff full-time. Oriana says that because spiritual

traditions often value the monastery above the family, "I thought I would have to decide between spiritual life and parenting. I was really happy when the two came together."

Most staff members without partners practice celibacy, not out of doctrine but because they live away from the world and avoid casual relationships. However, at Tashirat, celibacy doesn't mean an absence of family. Oriana, for instance, is parenting three special-needs girls.

**THI'ARA'S FAMILY: Kian, Maria, and Isabelle**

As I dined with Thi'ara and her family, I watched 5-year-old Isabelle ("Isa") plow through a colossal bowl of cucumbers swimming in a tomato-almond dressing. Most children I know wouldn't eat that many vegetables in a month. Isa and her twin sister, Aria, were born to a disabled mother and kept at the DIF in a crib for a year. At age 2 1/2, Isa arrived at Tashirat as an invalid—she couldn't even hold her head up. As she slowly tapered off her heavy medications and started eating well, her improvements were remarkable, Thi'ara says. Now she's running along with the rest of the kids, although still behind most kids her age in speech and motor skills.

**ARISTA: Her role is feeding all the families**

The rotating role of cook is key, and during my visit, community meals were prepared by Gloria Ochoa (Arista), the only full-blooded Mexican staff member and the oldest at 59.

Arista was taking a break from raising kids while she mastered the lessons of the kitchen. "You must prepare a special, beautiful plate for the kids so they will eat the vegetables," she explains.

Nutrition is central to Tashirat philosophy. The Tashirat diet approaches vegan and is about 70 percent raw. Residents eschew



**MORE FAMILIES:** From left: Kaisha with her mother, Artimia, Tashirat's founder; Kaisha with adopted brother, David, left, and brother, Jobnathan; Ashanya with (clockwise from top left) Cristian, Carlos, Julito, Angie; Arista preparing a meal for seven staff members and 19 children. Opposite: Oriana with Yola, Lianna, and Aria; Thi'ara with Maria, Isa, and her birth son, Kian.

alcohol, caffeine, sugar, and refined foods (save a loophole for tortillas). Mexico's tropical produce makes this diet easy—juicy mangoes and papaya are breakfast; ripe avocados, tomatoes, and jicama serve as lunch and dinner. Food combining is also important, with each item said to have a different vibration corresponding to the chakras.

How does she feel about taking her turn in the kitchen rather than parenting a family? "I look at the face of the children," Arista says. "When they say, 'it's yummy,' I am happy." —K. B.

*Author's note: Since my visit, Tashirat has taken on an additional two children, and all the family constellations have changed. Tashirat has hired a cook and Arista cares for two kids.*

Kaisha says. The community soon decided unanimously on a new model, approved by the DIF: Each staff member would take kids personally into their homes, forming seven families.

"We had a tough time at the start," recalls Tashirat's only male staff member, Páraic Brannigan (Zayan), 30, from Ireland. "We didn't really know how to parent, and we weren't really of parenting age." At that time, five staff members were in their 20s, and in some cases had adopted kids only 10 years younger than themselves. Zayan remembers, "Disciplining the kids was difficult. They had to learn that some of the behaviors they had been taught—like violence, stealing, and name-calling—aren't acceptable here. They were very sensitive, and would cry often." Firm but compassionate discipline was needed.

Now, Zayan says, "It's flowing well in that the kids are well behaved and respon-

sible. They have all come along so far. I love them so much; they are so beautiful. They have been my greatest teachers."

By agreement, Tashirat takes only those who are unlikely to be adopted by families in their communities, typically older children or teenagers and kids with special needs. Children often arrive at Tashirat on heavy medication for hyperactivity or for seizure disorders caused by beatings or other abuse; many are malnourished. Staff slowly taper the children off the medication and help them move to a healthy, sugar-free diet. "When the kids receive good food, attention, and love," Kaisha says, "they are transformed."

The former orphanage buildings now house clients for group retreats, which, along with outside donations, help to fund Tashirat's operations. Individual sponsors cover basic food and clothing expenses for most of the children, and Tashirat has the adoptive status of an orphanage. >>

*Tashirat is a small community with huge aspirations to serve humanity.  
Seventeen needy children have found a home there.*



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## PARENTING AS A SPIRITUAL PATH

Says Kaisha, "I can't find words to describe how much the staff has grown and our hearts have expanded. It's a whole new level of service." When asked if she wants to have children of her own, she replies, "There are so many kids in the world. Why not take one who is already here and give them a chance at a better life?" Raising these kids in a loving environment will hopefully spare them, she says, from a life of drug addiction and crime, a common fate for street children in Mexico.

In a sense, the children's path is also a spiritual one—whether or not they realize it—as they embrace their unusual parents and lifestyle and learn to appreciate Tashirat's unique opportunities.

The arrangement of families changes periodically, as the kids grow into teenagers, more children are accepted, and staff and children discover where natural affinities lie. The community has also found that splitting siblings among different guardians helps avoid squabbles.

## THE TASHIRAT PHILOSOPHY

Each morning after yoga class, I return to my bungalow and read Artimia's book *Cosmic Reawakening* while savoring a mango shake. The book puts forward the Tashirat philosophy, which could be

described as the eightfold path of yoga with a New Age twist. Certain aspects of the book jar my sensibilities, such as the frequent appearance of the words "cosmic" and "vibration" and the premise that Artimia telepathically received the teachings from a cosmic guide. However, I appreciate the down-to-earth practical advice the book contains about living by yogic principles.

Reading the book helps me to better understand the commitment of the Tashirat staff. Artimia writes that each of the body's seven chakras, or energy centers, corresponds to a life lesson. As we complete these lessons, not necessarily in order, we evolve. The two lessons that staff focus on most closely—conscious parenting (chakra 3) and living in a spiritual community (chakra 4)—are considered necessary steps in reaching higher levels of evolution.

## PERSONALIZING THE MESSAGE

As a woman approaching 40 at break-neck pace, still ambivalent about whether I want to have children, I am forced to look at the question of parenting straight on. I'm in awe of this young staff's commitment to their children, I envy their sense of community, and I respect their choice to live a meditative life away from



**TASHIRAT COMMUNITY MID-2007:** Six staff pose with all 19 children plus one well-bugged puppy.

the world. But it all just seems too—hard—core. I couldn't imagine taking on my own bevy of orphans. Is that fear talking, or reason?

I see how, by throwing themselves so wholeheartedly into the cauldron of parenting, Tashirat staff have realized alchemical transformations that may well be greater than the transformations of those on a more solitary spiritual path. I hope I'm not looking too long before I leap. +

### { THE LOGISTICS }

#### How to get there

Fly into Mexico City. Take a Transporte Terrestre taxi or the metro to the Tasqueña bus station. Board a bus to Tepoztlán (1 hour, \$6 USD) and then take another bus or a taxi to Tashirat.

#### Retreat options

Tashirat invites serious meditation students—rather than casual travelers—to apply for month-long intensives, teacher-trainer courses, and volunteer opportunities. The retreat facility is also available for private group retreats. See [tashirat.com](http://tashirat.com) for details.

#### Donations

The Tashirat Association has legal nonprofit status in Mexico and is awaiting foundation status in the States. To learn about donating or sponsoring a child's basic needs and/or education, visit [tashiratkids.org/home](http://tashiratkids.org/home). Donations of clothing, books, toys, and other goods are also welcome.

#### Contact

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 From outside Mexico:  
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