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How far would you go to honor your spouse? Garden Grove councilman Steve Jones became a monk.

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GARDEN GROVE It's 5 a.m. and Steve Jones is getting ready to go out.

Normally, at that hour he would be sound asleep in his cozy bed – in his Garden Grove home.

But right now, the 39-year-old city councilman and real estate financier is in a remote Laotian village, housed in a centuries-old Buddhist temple and leading the life of a monk. His head is shaved. His body is draped in ochre robes.



He carries a silver begging bowl in his hands. His face is serious. He's walking down a narrow pathway in single file with other monks from the temple down to the village of Pafang. His friend, Roderic Stoddard, who stuck with Jones since their days at Rancho Alamitos High School, follows in similar fashion. Both men feel as if they are on a mission.

"It's such a raw experience when you're actually sent out to beg for food," Stoddard says.

It is the moment both men realize that there is no looking back now.

They walk up to stations in the village where they hope someone will bring them food. If they get food, they'll eat that day.

People stream into the stations that morning. They want to see the "American monks." They want to ask them questions.

Why are they in that little Laotian village? What are they doing in a Buddhist temple? And why do they want to live as monks?

But Jones has no questions about the sacrifice he has made. His mind is as calm and as clear as the Mekong River that flows through the picturesque plain swathed in fertile soil and lush rice fields.

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When he got engaged to Manivone, Jones was elated. The youngest of eight, her parents were Laotian immigrants who had escaped from Pafang by boat and fled the country during a time of internal strife and violence.

Manivone was only 3 years old when she came with her family to the United States. She has never been back since.

Jones was particular that the wedding followed both the American and the Laotian tradition. He held extensive meetings with Manivone's family, planning the 600-person wedding.

It was during one of these discussions that Manivone's older sister came up with the question. "Well, you know that if you have to marry Mani, you need to go to Laos and be a monk at a Buddhist temple, shave your head and cleanse your sins?"

Jones did not know that. But he soon realized the family was having some fun at his expense.

"I was just kidding," his sister-in-law said reassuringly. "You don't have to that."

Jones paused for a few seconds.

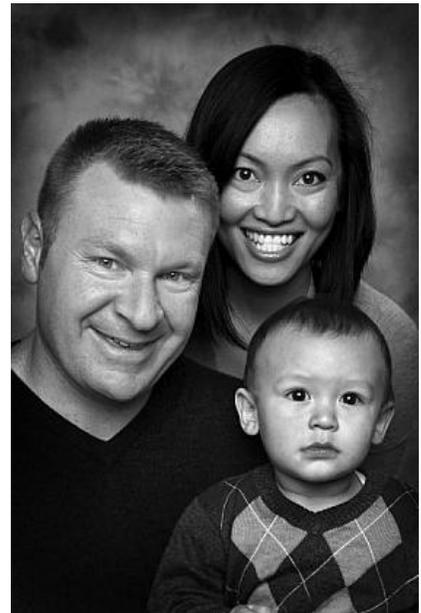
"Yes I do," he replied to his shocked in-laws.

Six months after his wedding, Jones set out to fulfill his promise. His mother-in-law made arrangements with the abbot of the temple in Pafang so Jones could live a monk's life there for a week. But before they left Manivone got pregnant and couldn't join her husband.

That's when Jones called Stoddard.

"We were two of a kind," Jones said. "I knew he would never give up this chance to be part of a very unique and rare experience."

He was of course right about his friend.



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Jones was struck by the beauty of the Laotian countryside.

He watched children frolicking in the Mekong River and the little streams that crisscrossed the village. Farmers were plowing the rice fields. People were sitting by the river with their fishing rods grilling and eating their catch in real time.

When Jones arrived with his mother-in-law and some of his wife's siblings, he got a hearty welcome. He and Stoddard spent one day getting oriented. But the very next day, they were whisked off to begin their lives as monks in the Buddhist temple, which does not normally permit anyone who is not Laotian to live there.

Their heads were shaved. They were given their robes, several yards long, which had to be folded, tucked and wrapped around many times.

The monks ate only two meals during the day – a light breakfast and a heavier early lunch.

They participated in several prayers and rituals during the day and even learned a few chants that were in an ancient language. The entire temple vibrated when the monks chanted.

Some of the larger silver goblets at the altar of the golden Buddha reminded Jones, a hockey fan, of the Stanley Cup.

But he tried to focus on the rituals, the prayers. Sitting on the hard, marble floor with both legs to the side while his hands were folded in prayer was probably the toughest challenge.

He and his friend slouched sometimes and were immediately chastised by the older monks to sit properly, much to the amusement of the teenaged novices, who giggled helplessly.

For Stoddard, the robes were a constant source of apprehension.

"The last thing I wanted was for the robes to fall off when I was outside and the villagers shocked at the sight of a naked white man," he said with a laugh.

They also spent several hours in the afternoon in solitude, the silence punctuated only by the growling of their empty stomachs.

Within a couple of days, the eager foreigners found little projects to do in the temple. They helped clean the temple and put new fixtures in the classrooms where the monks studied.

When the week was done and it was time to leave, the men were ordained as monks and then asked to "resign" the next day.

"I don't think I've ever felt that free," Jones said.

Suddenly, he had the liberty to be able to eat what he wanted, do what he wanted and go where he wanted. Suddenly these choices seemed precious.

What was his first meal as a former monk?

Jones found a McDonald's in neighboring Thailand as soon as they got out. A cheeseburger never tasted better.

But now that Jones is home, sitting on the dais in Council Chambers, discussing the mortgage market and researching the coolest cell phones, he misses the serenity of Laos.



"That week was so special," he says. "It was nothing like anything I'd ever experienced in my life."

When things get crazy in City Hall or at work, his mind can wander back to Pafang – the temple, the river and the green fields.

"It's my happy place," he says.

Jones says the experience has also brought him closer to his wife and her family.

They were not only impressed with his commitment to this experience, but also the seriousness of his approach, his wife said.

"I was shocked and proud that he did it," Manivone says.

Her family was at first skeptical if Jones would survive in the temple. They loved him right from the start, but had to wonder if he would really understand.

"But he did it and it means a lot to our family," she said. "After this, he wasn't just a son-in-law. He is the son."

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