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SOCIAL JUSTICE & COMMUNITY

## A sanctuary for women leaders: CoRE receives transformative gift

Anonymous gift strengthens the future of retreats designed to empower women leaders across academia and industry

April 23, 2025 By [Christy Tall](#)



Participants in a CoRE retreat

Ten women who arrived as strangers stand shoulder to shoulder, transforming individual fruits into a communal creation. A biology professor slices strawberries while chatting with an engineering department chair who's cubing pineapple. A dean of students peels kiwis as a research director sections oranges. This collaborative fruit salad preparation—a deliberate icebreaker activity at many CoRE retreats—establishes the weekend's tone and purpose: different perspectives coming together to create something nourishing for all. By the time the large bowl is filled with vibrant colors and flavors, the first threads of community have already begun to form.

This is how CoRE retreats begin—with community building through shared experience.

CoRE, which stands for Community of Replenishment and Empowerment, has been providing transformative weekend retreats for women leaders since 1993, when it was founded by UC Santa Cruz Psychology Professor Emerita Faye Crosby under the original name “Nag’s Heart.” Now, thanks to a recent anonymous gift that will strengthen its endowment, the organization’s future is more secure than ever.

“The retreats give participants a sense of being pampered while tackling serious professional challenges,” explains UCSC Professor Emerita of MCD Biology Susan Strome, who took over as CoRE director in 2022 after Crosby’s nearly 30-year leadership. “We call it a spa for the soul.”

The organization has hosted approximately 110 retreats serving over 650 participants since 1993. CoRE offers about five retreats annually, with each retreat hosting around 10 participants guided by two facilitators. With philanthropic support and gifts from past retreat attendees, CoRE can provide retreats, valued at about \$400 per person, free of charge. Participants are only responsible for their transportation to the retreat location.

### **A Structured Approach to Support**

The retreat format follows a carefully honed structure. Usually participants arrive at the event location, typically a private home or Airbnb-type rental, on Friday evening for dinner and introductions, with each person bringing a professional dilemma related to the retreat’s theme. Saturday and Sunday feature structured work sessions where participants take turns presenting their challenges and receiving feedback from peers.

“The goal is for participants to benefit from peer support, the sense of community and trust, and the ability to strategize on their dilemmas and the dilemmas of others,” Strome says.

Two guiding principles anchor the experience: confidentiality and honesty.

“Everything that is said stays among the participants, but lessons may leave,” Strome explains. “And we ask for complete honesty—speak the truth, nothing but the truth.”

That said, participants are encouraged to share only what feels comfortable for them. “You don’t have to speak the whole truth,” Strome adds. “If there are some parts of the

truth that are uncomfortable, you do not have to go there. There's no mandate to bare your soul."

The retreats are intentionally designed to eliminate professional hierarchies. Participants come from across the country, with care taken not to include colleagues from the same departments. Potential participants are identified through recommendations from colleagues and past retreat attendees rather than through a formal application process.

While work sessions form the core of the retreat, the weekend also includes shared meals, local activities like walks or art projects, and ongoing conversations. The retreat concludes with a moving closing ceremony where participants pass a heart-shaped object around the circle, each speaking from the heart about their experience.

Retreat themes are responsive to participants' evolving needs. Recent retreats have focused on topics including "Women Leaders in STEM," "Living in a Post-CV World," "Women in Tech," and "Finding Purpose & Joy in Our Next Chapters."

### **Measurable Impact**

Post-retreat surveys reveal consistently positive feedback, with participants ranking various aspects of the experience between 4.9 and 5.0 on a 5-point scale. Words like "magic," "peer mentoring," "shared wisdom," "community," "empowerment," and "replenishment" frequently appear in participant reflections.

Perhaps most telling is how many retreat groups maintain connections long after the official program ends.

"One particular retreat group has been meeting with each other twice a year for about five years," Strome shares. "Their theme is living in a post-CV world and retirement. Those participants moved from pre-retirement to retirement, and stayed together to support each other in the process."

### **Sustainable Future**

The recent anonymous gift will bolster CoRE's endowment, which is managed by the UC Santa Cruz Foundation. This financial stability will help ensure the organization can continue offering transformative experiences for years to come.

The organization has established a leadership collaborative with six academic members who share responsibilities for planning retreat themes, identifying retreat facilitators, and helping to organize event logistics. Members typically serve three-year terms, with leadership roles rotating to ensure fresh perspectives.

As CoRE looks ahead with renewed financial security, the organization remains focused on its core mission: supporting and empowering feminists working in academia and industry, providing “a relaxed and safe environment where retreat participants share and discuss dilemmas, experience invigoration and empowerment to tackle their dilemmas and build community.”

The recent anonymous gift ensures this vital work will continue, creating more spaces where women leaders can find community, strategize solutions to professional challenges, and return to their institutions refreshed and empowered.

For more information about CoRE, including how to nominate a participant, visit their website at <https://www.corefeministretreats.com/>. If you would like to help further strengthen the program by giving to its endowment or directly to the program, please contact Joop Rubens, Executive Director of Development, Liberal Arts and the Library, [jrubens@ucsc.edu](mailto:jrubens@ucsc.edu) or 831.252.0061.

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