



NEWSDAY / ALEANDRA VILLA LOARCA

Linda Lombardo, 71, helped Sands Point Preserve build its forest bathing walk program a few years ago. She guides walks at other parks, too. ■ Video: newsday.com/Act2

Breathing with the trees

'Forest bathing' guide helps Long Islanders slow down and connect with nature

BY ARLENE GROSS
Special to Newsday

For Linda Lombardo, stepping into the forest is like entering a portal into another world.

"I'm aware of all the life around me, the intelligence and wisdom of the trees and other living beings — they are breathing just like I am," said Lombardo, 71, who lives in Copiague. "That slows my breath. We breathe together. The boundaries between us grow softer, and there's a peace that comes over me."

As the first certified forest

therapy guide on Long Island, Lombardo aims to help others find that peace through contemplative walks known as forest bathing. Since 2017, she has partnered with Sands Point Preserve, Bayard Cutting Arboretum in Great River and other parks on and near Long Island, where she guides people to simply slow down and connect with nature.

"I've led over 200 walks, and most of them are on Long Island," she said.

Noting that Lombardo introduced and helped build Sands Point Preserve's forest bathing walk program a few years ago, Tracy Strianese, education director for the preserve, said, "I think people really don't quite understand what forest bathing is. They might be a little appre-

hensive about it, but she does a really nice job of making you feel welcome, inviting you into the forest and helping you reconnect with nature."

'A REAL SENSE OF FREEDOM'

Based on the Japanese tradition of Shinrin-yoku, a forest bathing walk is meant to help

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Taking a dip in the forest

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foster a deeper connection with nature.

"I say we're walking with nature — we're not walking in it, we're not walking through it," Lombardo said.

The walks begin with "grounding," where everyone tries to release their everyday cares, be in the moment and be mindful of their surroundings.

"Grounding is an invitation to notice our feet on the earth, first and foremost, then notice what's right around us, letting that noticing move outward in expanding circles until we can take in everything, even the horizon, if it's visible," Lombardo said.

What follows are a series of "invitations," where people get to choose how they engage. An invitation to "get curious, connect with a tree," for example, can inspire a range of responses from participants.

"There are some people that literally throw themselves at trees. They hug them, and they just can't wait," Lombardo said.

“There are some people that literally throw themselves at trees . . . And then there are other people who are not so sure.”

— Forest therapy guide Linda Lombardo

"And then there are other people who are not so sure they want to put their hands on something outdoors, but will find a way to walk around it."

At times, people gather in a circle and share what they've observed — always in a non-judgmental way.

"Nobody gets to be wrong when they're forest bathing," Lombardo said, adding, "In a world where we often tell people what they should think and what they should feel and what they should do, there's a real sense of freedom in forest bathing."

Lombardo will often suggest group activities, like creating forest art out of sticks, pine cones, acorns, spent hydrangea

blossoms or any other things they find on the ground, to help bring people closer together.

The walks end with a group tea ceremony.

"It's another opportunity to connect with people," Lombardo said.

Joanne Tucci, 56, a special education teacher who lives in North Bellmore, has gone on several walks with Lombardo. She said no matter what's happening in her life, within minutes of being out on the walks she experiences a sense of calmness and peace.

"She's guiding you in such a caring and nurturing way, and she makes you feel safe and valued and appreciated," Tucci said of Lombardo. "And then,

connecting with nature just really helps me to connect to myself and to what's going on inside me emotionally and physically."

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Growing up in Highland Park, New Jersey, Lombardo always loved the outdoors — climbing trees and finding tadpoles as she waded through streams.

But her career path took a rather circuitous route before she returned to her roots.

"It took me a long time to get back to nature," she said. "As a teenager, there were so many distractions: I was doing theater in high school, getting ready for college and thinking about my career."

A theater major at Northeastern University, Lombardo would go on to act on stage and in film for about a decade and a half, until her divorce. Then, needing to support herself and her young son, she switched to the corporate world, eventually becoming manager of management and leadership development at Cablevision.

Over the years, Lombardo realized she needed more fulfillment than the corporate life afforded her, and she trained to be a life coach with Coaches Training Institute. She became certified in 2002 at the early stages of the life coach movement, at the age of 50.

"It was a personal transformation as well as a profes-



NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

Guide Linda Lombardo shares tea with hikers while leading a forest bathing walk at Alley Pond Environmental Center in Bayside, Queens, this month.

sional transformation to really get to see the different perspectives," Lombardo recalled. "A life coach basically helps somebody looking in different places for her own answers."

A decade later, Lombardo took a yearlong online leadership program through the same coaching institute that included several retreats in Asheville, North Carolina. There, she learned how to get out of her comfort zone, including overcoming her fear of heights and climbing on high ropes.

"I think some of it has really helped me when I've transitioned from different avocations," she said.

The leadership program ended with a "quest" to create change, which led to her "Voice of Evolution" podcast. The podcast focused on people making positive and sustainable change in the world, like Otto Scharmer, senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of "Theory U: Leading From the Future as It



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Sharmela Mediratta and her husband, Rob MacKay, at Alley Pond Environmental Center; at the start of the walks, Lombardo encourages participants to welcome a feeling of being "with" nature, not "in" it.



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Flushing resident Leah Pascarella examines a list from Lombardo of things she might encounter during her forest therapy walk.

Emerges."

Lombardo hosted the podcast for a few years, but when podcasting became more commonplace, she decided it was time to move on.

In 2017, her friend Diane DeVivo, aware of her love for nature, suggested forest bathing to her.

"I was interested in it and I mentioned it to Linda," said

DeVivo, 73, who now lives in Melrose, Massachusetts, and works as an end-of-life coach. "I thought she's such a good coach and also has an interest in nature and loves to be out in nature. She took it and just sort of dove right into it."

Training with the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, now based in Arizona, entailed an eight-day

immersion program in the Berkshires, six months of journaling, walking alone and walking with a mentor. It all culminated in her certification in December 2017, funded in part by a GoFundMe campaign started by another friend.

"It was just that feeling of support from the people around me that made me even more determined that I could make it happen," Lombardo said.

EVER-EVOLVING

Lombardo sometimes takes clients on private coaching walks where she melds her life coaching and forest bathing skills by walking, talking, listening and sometimes challenging them. If, for example, she knows a client has a deep emotional wound and sees a tree trunk full of scars from blight, she'll make that connection.

"I've always been a lifelong learner," she said. "I do use everything I've trained for. I just keep using it differently."

Lombardo said she has learned from many of the people who have accompanied her on walks, and spending time with people in the woods has also made her much more

JOIN A WALK

Want to try forest bathing? Linda Lombardo will host the following walks:

■ **Bayard Cutting Arboretum**, 440 Montauk Hwy. in Great River, July 1 and Aug. 5 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

■ **Sands Point Preserve**, 127 Middle Neck Rd. in Sands Point, July 21 from 6 to 7:30 p.m. and Aug. 19 from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m.

To register for a walk or to learn more about forest bathing, visit wildheartnatureconnection.com

hopeful about the world.

"Nature makes us more permeable," Lombardo said. People often share personal stories with strangers and will help one another, like the time a man assisted an older woman traversing a steep section of the trail.

"He didn't know her," Lombardo said. "He just went right over and held out his arm and she smiled and she took it. And they walked together."

Since September, Lombardo has had a gig as an educator for kids' and adult programs at Sweetbriar Nature Center in Smithtown. Twice a month, she also brings some of the center's permanent wildlife residents, from pythons to hawks, to patients and residents at the Northport VA Medical Center.

In addition to her nature work, Lombardo still works as a life coach and enjoys helping people find what they like to do. She often asks them what they wanted to be when they were kids.

"People light up when they talk about the things they wanted to be when they were little," she said. "And often it's not at all what they're doing right now."

Typically equipped with her camera on her walks, Lombardo is fond of capturing images of things that people often don't seem to notice, like a tree that looks like it has a face, and often shares photos on Facebook. She also recently displayed some of her photographs at an exhibit at Four Harbors Audubon Society in Setauket.

Of photography, Lombardo said, "I really would like to do more. I think that that's the next evolution for me."