



# Sheldrake Environmental Center in the News

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## Sheldrake celebrates 25 years of nature conservation and education

By MIMI KOREN

The Sheldrake Environmental Center, the major environmental organization in Larchmont/Mamaroneck, has had several different parents. It is the direct descendent of the Friends of the Reservoir and the L.I.F.E. Center, created when the two groups merged in 2001. But whatever its name, the organization has always called one place home: the Larchmont Reservoir - James G. Johnson, Jr. Conservancy.

On Friday, May 1, Sheldrake will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of its home with a benefit at the Bonnie Briar Country Club, located at 808 Weaver St. just across from the reservoir property. The benefit begins at 7:00 p.m. and includes a light buffet dinner and a silent auction.

Sheldrake today serves the communities of Larchmont, Mamaroneck, New Rochelle, Scarsdale and surrounding areas. Its mission is to "inspire environmental awareness and action in our community and to preserve, protect and enhance local environmental resources." It is the steward of the 60-acre Conservancy property, which is owned by the Village of Larchmont but located partly in the Town of Mamaroneck and partly in New Rochelle.

But this Conservancy very nearly was not conserved. For nearly a century Sheldrake Lake and Goodliffe Pond – the heart of the property – had provided the water supply for the Village of Larchmont. The reservoir was decommissioned in the mid-1970s, when Larchmont was hooked up to the New York City water system, and soon the Larchmont Village Board put the land up for sale. "This lakeside area was a residential developer's dream," says a history written by Wallace Irwin, Jr., a long-time Larchmont resident. Unwilling to lose the unspoiled lakes, woods and meadow, a group of nature lovers incorporated as Friends of the Reservoir and fought to save the property from development; they were inspired by Larchmont environmentalist Mary Anne Johnson, a founder of the LIFE Center in 1970, and led by her husband, the attorney James G. Johnson, Jr. In 1984, the Larchmont board, under

Mayor Miriam Curnin, heeded their pleas and dedicated the property "in perpetuity" as a "conservation area for activities appropriate to its natural setting and quiet beauty," naming it after the man who worked so hard to save it.

"I am inspired by the hard work of our neighbors years ago to protect the property from development so that thousands of people can continue to experience the wonders and mysteries of nature so close to home," said Marie Venezia, Sheldrake's executive director.

With a tiny budget of about \$150,000 and only three full-time employees, Sheldrake now provides programs and education to 5,000 people a year. "Our budget is a fraction of our contribution to the community,"



Photo courtesy of Paul Degenhardt

Venezia pointed out. Much of the work is conducted by volunteers, including about 30 who are trained by the center and then work with professional environmental educators to teach some 250 groups a year from local public, private and parochial schools. Sheldrake also offers pre-school, after-school, vacation and summer programming to school children; works with the Girl and Boy Scouts, Mamaroneck High School science students, and the Larchmont/Mamaroneck Senior Center; leads the local segment of the nationwide Coastal Cleanup; mounts art exhibits; hosts a vegetable

garden that provides fresh food to the needy; and presents speakers on environmental topics for adults. Beginning June 1 it will host the inaugural Westchester County Master Composter and Recycler Program, an outgrowth of the county's Global Warming Action Plan.

"We use the property as an outdoor classroom," Venezia said, "and also conduct programs at Dog Beach and the Sheldrake River Trail."

But like everyone else, Sheldrake has been adversely affected by the economic downturn.

Ten percent of its funding comes from the Town and Village of Mamaroneck and the Village of Larchmont; more than 80% is from individual contributions. "Because everybody is feeling it, our contributions have been down," Venezia said. The group received a grant from the Mamaroneck Schools Foundation and in the past enjoyed some corporate support, particularly from Con Edison. But Venezia remarked, "Nothing is guaranteed this year." In an effort to reduce expenses, the annual Spring Festival has been postponed till next year, which makes the May 1 benefit all the more crucial.

Tickets to the anniversary event must be purchased in advance; they cost \$100, of which \$50 is tax deductible. They may be ordered by mail, addressed to Sheldrake Environmental Center, 685 Weaver St., Larchmont, NY 10538. For more information, call 834-1443 or e-mail Amy Bisignani, scheduling coordinator, at [scheduling@sheldrakecenter.org](mailto:scheduling@sheldrakecenter.org).

*Article re-printed with the permission of Home Town Media Group: from the April 17, 2009 issue.*

# The Sound & Town Report

Mamaroneck and Larchmont's Weekly Newspaper

In his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, author Richard Louv expresses the idea that society is growing ever more disconnected from nature, and that our children are suffering as a result. According to Louv this disorder affects our physical, mental and emotional health, and threatens to reshape our society.



**Westchester Family South Edition**

"Because of the media, people are more afraid of their children going outside into the woods," says Mary Davis, program director for the Sheldrake Environmental Center.... "Not all knowledge is in little cubbyholes, waiting for them to look it up in a book. They (children) can actually make discoveries themselves."

*Excerpts from article re-printed with the permission of Westchester Family Magazine: from the April 2008 issue.*

Happily, in the last few years the environment has taken center stage in our nation's consciousness. The word is spreading....The good news is that children are ready, even eager, to hear the message. Kids who visit a nature center are almost always excited to be there and they don't want to leave. They like nature and are hungry for a chance to experience it. Marie Venezia, executive director of the Sheldrake Environmental Center says, "It's not too late. Given the opportunity, when children are outdoors in nature, they respond."



photo: june marie sobrito

theloop<sup>SM</sup>

reservoir at sheldrake nature center, larchmont

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**Start Composting; Teach Composting**

Judy Silberstein, posted on May 1, 2009

On Saturday, May 2 at Saxon Woods Park from 9 am to 2 pm, Westchester County is giving away compost, providing free compost advice and selling compost bins at cut rates. In June, Larchmont's Sheldrake Environmental Center is going an extra step.

Sheldrake is offering "train-the-trainer" classes for a team of "environmental pioneers" willing to inspire others to compost and recycle through workshops, presentations and demonstrations in their communities. The trainers will instruct others in the gentle art of turning your kitchen and garden waste into "black gold." Other topics will bring the "interns" up-to-date on recycling rules specific to Westchester County.

Jennifer Jensen, a member of the Larchmont Village Committee on the Environment and a Sheldrake volunteer, is bringing the program to Westchester. She just graduated on Wednesday, April 29 from the master composter and recycler program at the University of Rhode Island, which has a similar curriculum to the one being piloted at the Sheldrake.

This will be "the first of its kind in Westchester," said Ms. Jensen, who is also a master gardener and one of three authors of the Gazette's garden column. She uses compost from two backyard bins to enrich her own gardens.

Ms. Jensen explained that a compost bin not only provides free nutrients for your soil, it also keeps the waste out of the garbage can. That saves money for the community - every ton of refuse costs Mamaroneck Town \$25 to haul away.

The Sheldrake "compost interns" will tour the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) in Yonkers to see what happens to items picked up from recycling bins every Wednesday. They will also trek to New Milford Farms, the first state-permitted composting facility in Connecticut.

Among the more exotic topics in the compost curriculum is vermicomposting - the use of worm castings to enrich the soil. If regular composting "is the Cadillac of soil nutrients, vermicompost is the Rolls Royce," said Ms. Jensen. "Earthworm castings often contain 5 to 11 times more nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium as compost." And for apartment dwellers willing to overcome the "ick factor," vermicomposting can be accomplished in a small bin tucked under the kitchen sink.

Program participants will meet at the Sheldrake Environmental Center at 685 Weaver Street for four Monday night lectures and two Saturday field trips in June. Topics to be covered include composting & recycling needs and benefits, recycling in Westchester County, backyard composting, vermicomposting (with worms), deconstruction and engaging communities. The program will culminate with program participants running a composting or recycling event in their own community.

There is a course fee of \$150 per participant, which includes the lectures, field trips and course materials. After completing the training, participants are expected to volunteer at least 35 hours in their communities.

For more information or to register for the course, call Amy Bisignani at 914-834-1443 or email Amy at [scheduling@sheldrakecenter.org](mailto:scheduling@sheldrakecenter.org)



Jennifer Jensen "feeds" kitchen waste into her backyard compost bin.

Larchmont Gazette

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