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Nurturing military personnel at Rancocas Nature Center



Nancy Rokos / staff photographer

Sophie Pastore, of Florence, a volunteer at the Rancocas Nature Center in Westampton, demonstrates how to color the drawings of plants and flowers during Military Appreciation Day at the center Sunday, Nov. 8, 2015.





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By Susan Sherry Miller, Correspondent

WESTAMPTON — Veterans and active-duty military families were treated to fresh apples and cider, a pleasant hike and a bit of reiki massage if they were so inclined at Military Appreciation Day at the Rancocas Nature Center on Sunday afternoon.

It was a perfect day to be out in nature: clear blue skies overhead, crunchy fall leaves underfoot and crisp, clean air in abundance. And that's just what Toni Price, co-chairwoman of the Friends of the Rancocas Nature Center, was hoping for on the Sunday before Veterans Day. What better way, after all, to honor and treat veterans and active-duty military personnel than a lovely day filled with refreshments, relaxation and a return to nature.

“There are a lot of military families in our area, and many of them don’t know we’re here,” Price said, referring to members of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst who live in Burlington County. “The idea for this event was, we wanted to really connect these dedicated people to the health benefits of nature. And we want these people to know that we appreciate their service to our country.”

“Being at the nature center is so relaxing,” Price added. “People, especially those in the military, sometimes need a change of pace. And when people in the service are away, it has an impact on their families. This nature center is a place where they can come to relax. We want them to know we’re right here, and hopefully we can help them in their lives.”

One way the visitors could relax was through a reiki session. Reiki is a Japanese word for an ancient system of healing described as a “universal life force energy.” It’s a noninvasive procedure using gentle touches to the shoulder, back, neck and head areas, and Sunday it was performed by master/teacher Maryann Marian and several others.

Most reiki sessions last between 30 and 90 minutes, but Marian and her peers did 10-minute mini sessions for visitors. The idea, according to Marian’s brochure, is to promote healing by removing energy blocks, to relieve stress throughout the mind and body, and to balance and integrate the body, mind and spirit.

Children had a chance to make colored leaf imprints on paper, with the assistance of volunteer Sophie Pastore, who worked at the center’s summer camp and comes back to help whenever there’s a need.

Matt Dupee was among the visitors Sunday. He lives in New Hampshire but grew up in Willingboro and loves the area, especially in fall.

“Being from out of state, you hear so many negative things about New Jersey, but the reality is, it’s as beautiful as any place I’ve ever seen,” Dupee said, adding that he wanted his wife to see the area he grew up in, the woods on the banks of the Rancocas Creek where he came of age.

“We used to chase muskrats on the creek when I was a kid.”

Dupee said that it’s beautiful where he lives in New Hampshire, with massive lakes and the majestic White Mountains. But for him, it doesn’t compare to the amenities of the good old Garden State.

“It’s a more intimate beauty here,” he said. “One of the most beautiful smells in the world is this area in the fall. I can’t explain it; I just love it.”

Price, too, is passionate about the natural beauty of this area, and in particular of the nature center. A beekeeper who owns acres of land in Tabernacle, she and other

members of the Friends have been working hard to raise awareness about the center. The group formed in January 2013 when the New Jersey Audubon Society announced it would close the financially troubled center. The Friends have run it independently for 2½ years through a partnership with the Burlington County Board of Freeholders, New Jersey State Park Service's Division of Parks and Forestry, township of Westampton and Rancocas Conservancy.

"Most people think the center is doing fine financially, but it isn't," Price said. "That's why we have events here."

The nature center is comprised of about 130 acres of wetlands, forest trails and meadows just off Rancocas Road, part of the Rancocas State Park. It's land that once served as a settlement for Quakers and Lenni Lenape Indians, and it's adjacent to Timbuctoo, a former colony of freed slaves.

Price said the Friends will start seeking corporate sponsorships to help keep the nonprofit center afloat. Throughout the year, the group offers nature walks, interpretive trail hikes, bird-watching, environmental education sessions and much more. The center also has a gift shop, live animals and history displays on-site. For more information, call 609-261-2495 or visit www.rancocasnaturecenter.org.