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Immersion in nature

Forest Bathing, adapted from Japan, is now available on Oahu

By Nancy Arcayna
Special to the Star-Advertiser

Trees cloaked in vines, rocks covered in moss, tree roots taking on a life of their own and majestic mountains in the distance were among the mesmerizing surroundings at a “forest bathing” experience held in Manoa valley last weekend.

The program, designed to support wellness and healing by immersion in a forest or natural environment, is conducted by Phyllis Look, a certified forest guide. She takes a small group on a three-hour adventure where each participant is invited to move slowly and mindfully in nature.

It’s all about enjoying each step of the journey. The trails are easy to navigate and don’t require a lot of physical exertion (the entire walk is less than a mile), and the lush, verdant grounds of Lyon Arboretum in Manoa provide an ideal backdrop.

There are opportunities to sit quietly in contemplation and invitations to invoke the senses and share with the group.

The tour culminated with a tea ceremony where mamaki tea, made from a Hawaiian nettle plant, was served.

FOREST BATHING is inspired by a Japanese tradition known as shinrin-yoku, which can also be interpreted as “taking in the forest atmosphere.” There are 48 therapy trails in Japan, said Look.

Forest therapy guides have no agenda for the participants. By helping them slow down, with invitations to notice their surroundings including the breeze, the birds, the fragrance and what’s in motion, the forest itself works the therapy of mental rest, Look explained.

“From that place of rest, whatever healing they need at whatever degree they’re open and ready for will happen.”

Participants on the tour shared how they felt that they could breathe better in the forest. One noticed how things fall and are transformed into something new. Others said they felt that it was what their body needed and that it was necessary to come back in contact with nature.

Some participants expressed how it made them feel calm and present; others said it helped them deal with a challenging problem, or grief.

“Visitors often comment on how this helped ground them and made them feel they were finally here in Hawaii, and residents say they became aware



PHOTOS BY CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARADVERTISER.COM

Above, Donna Chan closes her eyes while being lead through a forest bathing visualization and meditation process. At left, Leila Nagamine, left, and Elizabeth Mortham examine the roots of a tree. At bottom, a pot for mamaki tea is shared at the end of the forest therapy session.

FOREST BATHING HAWAII

WHERE:
Lyon Arboretum,
Manoa Valley

WHEN:
9 a.m.-noon,
Thursdays and
Saturdays

COST:
\$60; \$45 Hawaii
residents — get
a promo code at
forestbathinghi@
gmail.com

INFO:
forestbathinghi.
com or 492-8736



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of how they too often take for granted the beauty of our islands,” Look said.

“I enjoyed it more than I thought I would,” said Elizabeth Mortham, a California resident. “It was centering once I wasn’t afraid of the bugs and getting dirty. I’m feeling more connected as I head back to the concrete jungle of Los Angeles.”

Kaneohe resident Leila Nagamine added, “I felt a sense of belonging; how we all are a part of the ecological wholeness.”

LOOK WAS pondering retirement and looking for an “encore career” that would keep her physically active, engaged with others and contributing to making this world a better place when she discovered forest bathing. She obtained her forest therapy certification through the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs.

“I look back at the first two-thirds of my working life as

dedicated to the mission of bringing people together, first as a theater professional, then as a marketer and communicator,” she said.

“Throughout my indoor careers, I’ve always treasured my daily walks in the suburban, tree-lined streets in which I’ve lived, as well as hiking and gardening. They definitely helped me deal with job and personal stresses.”

Forest therapy seemed like a natural fit, she said.

According to Look, numerous books, articles, medical abstracts reporting on the science of forest therapy have been published over the past 30 years. Findings have shown benefits to the cardiovascular and immune systems, improved cognitive function, reduced stress and an increase in the sense of well being.

Although Look has to pay attention to what’s next and watch out for the safety of participants, she said she still feels the same sense of calm as the rest of the group.

“After the walk, I too feel extremely relaxed. Even while I’m cleaning up the equipment and the tea supplies, filing reports and writing a mahalo email, I’m still in a forest-bathing head space,” she said.

