

my therapy

— MY WILD LIFE —

Albie, Bouldnor Forest, Isle of Wight

Albie has had a love of nature from a young age. He first started getting out in nature as a Scout. He became a Scout leader and outward bound instructor, mostly working as a volunteer youth leader in addition to his paid jobs. Some years ago Albie was diagnosed with a heart condition that meant he had to give up marathon running and the outdoor pursuits he enjoyed. As a result Albie began to suffer from depression. Since then Albie has been coming to Woodland Therapy sessions at the Trust's Bouldnor Forest nature reserve on the Isle of Wight. Here, Albie explains how the sessions have reconnected him with nature and helped to bring him back to health.

When did you first become involved with the Woodland Therapy sessions at Bouldnor Forest?

I first became involved with the group two years ago. I came along to a Wildlife Tots session with my daughter and three of my grandchildren and spoke to Kathy, the Education Officer, about volunteering opportunities at the Trust. As we spoke more, Kathy told me about the Woodland Therapy project and how it could help me, and encouraged me to come along to the group the next week.



I haven't looked back. Woodland Therapy has been great. I have got as much back from it as I have put into it – probably more. Plus I've got new skills and learnt how to do things I've never thought of before, like the variety of green wood projects.

After my illness, I locked myself away from everything for five years and the Wildlife Trust has brought me back. The

support of friends, family and my dog helped a lot, but Woodland Therapy gave me a reason to get out and about every week. It was a way to get back out in the woods. The people in the group understand you and know exactly what you need and how you feel. I didn't know depression was an illness until I had it. Now, as a volunteer, I can support other people by listening and being there. Friends and family are not surprised that this is what has helped me in my recovery.

How has spending time in the outdoors helped you with your health and wellbeing?

Out here nothing else exists. I just get on with being in nature. It chills me out. I feel at home and I'm just pleased to be outside.

You now volunteer with the Woodland Therapy group on the Isle of Wight – what activities do you get involved with?

I'm the fire man! We have a camp fire every week to gather round and cook lunch. I prepare the wood, keep the fire in and keep the area safe and tidy. I do whatever folks need help with and hopefully have time to get on with projects of my own too. My camp craft skills are put to good use, but I'm just as happy to wash up!

I volunteer with the Woodland Therapy group every Monday and with Wildlife Tots on Thursdays and I enjoy it all, especially watching the wildlife. We get red squirrels in the woods and we have a tame pheasant (Phil), a resident female kestrel and a

pair of ravens. There's always something about if you watch and listen. There's also a lot of chatting and friendship. All sorts of people come out, all connected by the same thing. It's a community in the real sense of the word.

Can you tell us a bit more about yourself and how you first developed a love of nature?

I always loved playing outside as a kid and this carried on when I was a Cub, a Scout and then a Scout leader after my son joined the Cubs. I ended up as Group Scout Leader. We did lots of camping and hiking and I taught map and compass skills. This led on to volunteering with a local charity, supporting disadvantaged youngsters on the Isle of Wight through outdoor pursuits. During this time I took a few courses, including my Mountain Leadership qualification, which meant I could take groups off the Island for hill walking, abseiling and caving opportunities. I also ran survival weekends. It was more natural



Albie's wood craft examples.

to do these activities then than now. Kids weren't glued to electronic devices. They all enjoyed camping and all the activities that went with it – outdoor cooking, camp craft, bridge building, aerial slides, all kinds of things. I loved it just as much as the kids!

Why is nature important to you?

I look at nature from the Native American way of life and how they lived as conservationists. I've had so much fun with my own children enjoying the outdoors with camping trips and so on, and they grew up with a respect for nature. Now I'm able to teach my grandchildren.

The power of Woodland Therapy

There are a growing number of studies that attribute being outside to improved mental and physical wellbeing, from better recovery time for hospital patients who can see a natural landscape from their windows, to prisoners who are much calmer when videos of woodland scenes and recorded birdsong are playing.

Spending time in a natural space, particularly somewhere with trees, has been shown to physically change the chemicals in the brain and slow down our heart rate. Studies suggest that contact with soil boosts our serotonin levels, which is thought to help stabilise mood, emotion and sleep. Spending time in green spaces reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol and increases the amount of dopamine in our brains, which

calms us. Many theorists agree that human beings function better in natural environments because of our evolutionary heritage – a connection with nature is in our DNA and we need it to maintain our health and happiness.

Our Woodland Therapy project seeks to use the natural environment to promote mental health and the wellbeing of adults living with mental health conditions. The sessions complement mainstream mental health provision by building self-esteem, self-confidence and independence.

If you would like to know more about our Woodland Therapy project, please visit our website or contact Kathy Grogan on 01983 760018 or email Kathy.Grogan@hiwwt.org.uk.

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