

The great outdoors in her own backyard

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan | 2:33 p.m. Jan. 12, 2016 | Updated , 2:33 p.m.



SAN DIEGO, CA January 7, 2016 : | Judy Lincer, who works with Audubon and converted her backyard pool to a wetland, on Thursday at the UT in San Diego, California. | (Eduardo Contreras / San Diego Union-Tribune) *San Diego Union-Tribune*

When Judie Lincer steps out of her La Mesa home in the morning, she steps into a thriving miniature wetland, complete with shorebirds and dragonflies.

Lincer, 53, is a naturalist educator who spends her days guiding students through the natural wonders of San Diego's canyons and showing parents and teachers how to bring nature into education and take kids outside.

A retired special-education teacher, she works as a naturalist guide for Audubon San Diego, leading hikes through some of the region's wildlands. She also works with San Diego Children and Nature, developing and teaching lesson plans that draw upon the natural world.

At home, she's the happy caretaker of a backyard pond. The tiny wildlife sanctuary in her backyard began as a standard suburban pool. After removing the pool chemicals, adding wetland plants and actually encouraging algae, she converted it to a riparian oasis last fall.

For Lincer, a cancer survivor who beat a very serious case of breast cancer 18 years ago, every day outdoors is a day well-lived.

Q: Please describe what you do.

A: I work with students in nature settings on their schoolyards or in nearby nature areas such as local canyons, and we explore and observe the outdoors together. My main job is to get children excited about being in nature and learn to love it. Along the way we observe native plants and animals, discuss ecosystems, adaptations, the importance of conservation, threats to local nature, make new discoveries together, dig for invertebrates and have other wonderful experiences.

Q: What were your earliest connections with nature?

A: I grew up in Queens, New York, and was fortunate to have lived in a garden apartment next to a natural area and a colonial farmhouse restoration. As children, we spent a great deal of time climbing through the fence and exploring nature. On one of my hikes behind our apartment, I found some cocoons that I thought would hatch out to be moths. I shared them with my fourth-grade class and left them on the science table. A few days later, they hatched and out came hundreds of baby praying mantises — all over the classroom! I thought that was super cool and became hooked on nature and wildlife for the rest of my life.

Q: What is your role in San Diego Audubon programs?

A: I work at San Diego Audubon as a Naturalist Guide. I lead hikes at Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary in Lakeside and take students out on hikes in local canyons during after-school programs. We make observations about nature, climb, explore, watch birds and enjoy beautiful local places. Students love the experience and doing hands on learning is the best way for students to remember information and integrate learning.

Q: Please tell us about your work with San Diego Children and Nature.

A: I model lessons for teachers and show them how they can utilize their schoolyards and nearby nature for science lessons. When you take kids out in nature and let them explore, they have a great time and learning is much more memorable. I also coordinate schoolyard habitat workshops around the county, so parents and community members learn how they can adapt their schoolyards to plant native gardens and utilize the schoolyards for lessons in science, math, language arts, social studies, and art.

Q: Please describe how you converted your swimming pool to a backyard wetland.

A: The transformation of our pool started when I went to a meetup on permaculture in May. There was a five-minute video segment on pool-to-pond conversion and I was totally hooked on the concept. So many Californians have pools that are underutilized and it made good sense to make a swimming pond that could benefit the environment in a positive way and also be so beautiful and enjoyable.

Q: What kind of wildlife is using your backyard wetland?

A: Within the first week after we stopped chlorinating, we had dragonflies laying eggs in the pond. Three weeks later, we had four species of dragonfly nymphs living in the pond. In mid-June, we purchased and rescued koi. In just six weeks, we had hundreds of adult dragonflies hatching — spectacular! Amongst our frequent flier friends, we have attracted an egret, a great blue heron and even an osprey. We have even started seeing salamanders. Of course, koi are not native but they are gorgeous and are good mosquito larvae eaters!

Q: What are your tips to other people considering a pool conversion?

A: If you are considering transitioning your pool to a pond, take a look at some online designs, visit people who have done the same thing and consider all the benefits. The great thing about this approach is that if you change your mind, you can easily turn your pond back into a pool since there are no structural changes. We never will, but it is good to know that it can be done.

Q: What's the best advice you ever received?

A: Be positive, be flexible and maintain your sense of humor. That is my personal and professional motto.

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: I used to have a serious fear of spiders. It is embarrassing to think about it now. However, when I took an animal biology course in college, I became intrigued and fascinated by spiders and I now try to pass that fascination on to my students. It works.

Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: My ideal weekend would be, spending some time in our yard admiring our native plant garden and sitting by the pond and sipping tea with my husband and feeding the koi. A favorite afternoon activity would be taking our dogs for a hike or going kayaking with friends. In the evening, I love going out to a great vegetarian or Indian restaurant, dining al fresco and having a delicious, nourishing meal.

deborah.brennan@sduniontribune.com Twitter@UTFeatures

© Copyright 2016 The San Diego Union-Tribune. All rights reserved.