

Volunteer helps make Ryerson accessible with bilingual tours

BY BRIDGET O'SHEA boshea@pioneerlocal.com July 16, 2012 12:24PM



Valerie Lewis (center) helps lead a hike put on by the Friends of Ryerson Woods and the Lake County Forest Preserve in cooperation with the Nuestro Center July 11. | Curtis Lehmkuhl~Sun-Times Media

Up Close

NAME: Valerie Lewis

ALSO KNOWN AS: Ryerson Woods bilingual tour guide

HOMETOWN: Bannockburn

Bannockburn resident Valerie Lewis has been a volunteer for Friends of Ryerson Woods in Riverwoods for one year, but she had close ties to the nature preserve long before she began her volunteer work.

Lewis, who helps lead bilingual nature hikes through various Lake County Forest Preserves, said she used to take her children, who are now grown, to the Ryerson preserve.

“The Ryerson family had a little farm there,” said Lewis, adding the preserve still has chickens and sheep. “We would go over there and take a walk in the woods.”

Lewis, an avid bird watcher, said she became interested in the bilingual nature hikes because she can speak Spanish moderately.

“It’s far from fluent, but I can understand,” Lewis said. “I’ve been trying to brush off the rust.”

Lewis said the hikes, which take place from late spring through early autumn, have varied in size from a dozen participants to close to 35. She enjoys the children that come out, but many adults are just as enthusiastic.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to be outside,” Lewis said. “It’s an opportunity also to meet people from other parts of the county.”

Lewis believes it’s important Lake County’s Latino community feels comfortable in the area’s nature preserves, so they can take their children out to enjoy them. Nature preserves offer good opportunities for exercise.

“The idea is to try and familiarize Latinos with forest preserves in Lake County,” Lewis said.

Marcela Alva, who also leads the bilingual hikes, said she is lucky to have these nature preserves close by, giving her the ability to introduce some of the Latino community to what these preserves offer. “It’s giving me the opportunity to learn and to meet very interesting, lovely and passionate people,” she said.

Alva said everyone she takes on these hikes seems to enjoy them.

“I think the best way to learn is through living the experience and the hikes are a wonderful educational tool,” she said.

Lewis said another reason she decided to become involved with Friends of Ryerson Woods was to get the word out about the organization, which offers art programs, reading groups and other educational initiatives focused on nature and wildlife in the area.

“I’ve gone over there for lots of different programs,” Lewis said.

Lewis said her husband, an amateur photographer, recently displayed some of his photos in the facility for Friends of Ryerson Woods.

“I was so astonished when so many people said they’d never heard of it,” Lewis said.

Ryerson Reads, an adult reading program that Lewis has also been involved with, is a reading group that focuses on books about nature and wildlife.

“It’s a shame more people don’t know about that,” she said.

Lewis, originally from Britain, said she moved to the United States with her husband and has lived in the area for more than 35 years. Lewis said she and her husband have gone bird watching in several South American countries and have traveled to Africa to see the continent’s wildlife.

Now, Lewis said, she is involved in several organizations that focus on nature and environmental issues, one of which is the Friends of Ryerson Woods.

“They have some very good programs there,” she said.

VIEW GALLERY



Valerie Lewis (left) and Marcela Alva, Latino outreach intern for the Friends of Ryerson Woods, help lead a hike put on by the Friends of Ryerson Woods and the Lake County Forest Preserve in cooperation with the Nuestro Center July 11. | Curtis Lehmkuhl



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Valerie Lewis (center) talks with fellow volunteer Cindy Rangel as they help lead a hike put on by the Friends of Ryerson Woods and the Lake County Forest Preserve. | Curtis Lehmkuhl~Sun-Times Media



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