LINKED IN TRANSLATION

Volunteer Profile: Elizabeth Pierce and Florrie Wescoat

Julie Warsowe, Manager of Visitor Education

It’s a beautiful spring day, trees are flowering, and the Arboretum is full of visitors from near and far. As you look around, chances are good that you’ll have a question—Where are the cherry trees? Do maple trees have flowers? How did the dawn redwood get its name?—and in the past you might have been left wondering. But what’s that ahead? Who are those smiling folks in green aprons? You’ve just spotted some Arboretum Interpreters, our volunteer encyclopedias of Arboretum knowledge.

Elizabeth Pierce and Florrie Wescoat are two of nearly 20 individuals trained as Arboretum Interpreters in 2009. While Elizabeth had been visiting the Arboretum for nearly a decade, Florrie was a newcomer to the area and was captivated by the Arboretum from her first visit. The Interpreter program offered an ideal way for both to help a beloved organization, continue their passion for learning and exploration, and meet people with similar interests. “It gives me a purpose,” says Elizabeth. “Obviously I’d come here many times on my own, but volunteering offers a reason. I really feel like we are doing something of value for the Arboretum, and it’s very energizing to introduce people to this amazing urban green space.”

Interpreters are trained in the art of interaction as well as Arboretum history, collections, and the basics of plant science. The goal is to connect with visitors, and a great way to connect is to let visitors’ interests and curiosity direct the conversation. “I often end up saying ‘I don’t know,’ but it’s fun. The conversations are quite flexible, like being at a party,” says Florrie. Elizabeth adds, “The conversation can go in any direction. It’s remarkable, the range of interests and the diversity of appeal that you find when you start talking with people about plants. It opens up doors of awareness for people.” Florrie agrees: “There’s a cultural benefit to having an international collection of plants. People come and they are very excited when they see familiar plants. Intergenerational conversations spark among families when they share stories about plants they remember from home.”

Pairs of Interpreters set up mobile kits on weekends in highly visible areas of the Arboretum, often near a plant in bloom. “A beautiful flower makes it easy for people to stop and talk,” says Florrie. Elizabeth finds it enriching to work in pairs. “The partnering ends up being an opportunity to complement each other and tackle more questions. Every Interpreter has a specific skill, or point of view, or way of engaging.” For Florrie, the experience enriches every participant. “The one who has the answer often takes the lead, and you end up learning from everyone you work with—including visitors.”

Share Your Love of Plants!

Love the Arboretum and want to share your fascination with others? Consider joining the Interpreter team when training begins this September. For more information and to download a volunteer application, please visit our website: www.arboretum.harvard.edu/education/volunteer/.