



Rosmarie Lohnes, President and CEO of Helping Nature Heal, at her business headquarters in Sin So'sepe'kapik/Bridgewater. She's the architect behind the Living Shorelines projects. Abundance refers to the bottled kelp fertilizer her business sells.

PHOTO: Nancy Forde

An Abundance of Joy

by **NANCY FORDE** /// EAC Volunteer

In 2021, a historic property was returned to the stewardship of the Mi'kmaq First Nation. Part sale, part gift, this act of reconciliation was the manifestation of a dream long held by Jim and Margaret Drescher. For three decades they lived at **Windhorse Farm**, 200 hectares of ancient woodlot, waterways and riparian zones. This special place now holds a new name: Asitu'lisk, a Mi'kmaq verb meaning 'that which gives you balance.'

Before it switched hands, Windhorse Farm became a nutrient-rich fertilizer within the soil of Rosmarie Lohnes' mind where a seed had been planted in childhood: a dream of land restoration. Lohnes grew up in Val Caron, a small mining town near Sudbury, Ont. She spent her youth playing in lush forests only to witness their annihilation by mining companies, like the one that employed her father. Her dad's mining job financed her education at Toronto's York University. It also heavily influenced her degree focus. With a

new millennium approaching and an environmental studies degree under her belt, she stood poised and determined to reconcile her own intimate history around the harmful impact of resource extraction.

Upon meeting Lohnes, I feel an overwhelming urge to hug her. Her face beams as she nears, and I'm drawn in by her engaging aura. I almost open my arms as I step forward, but correct myself as she extends long, piano fingers toward my hand in greeting. It's the same magnetic pull Lohnes says she felt after completing an internship on Nova Scotia's south shore in 1999. "I was meant to head to B.C.," she confesses, "but ended up out East." Three months transitioned to over a year as Lohnes bobbed between two internships: seed-to-seed gardening, and eco-forestry, brilliantly shepherded by Jim Drescher at Windhorse Farm.

When the internships ended, Lohnes returned to Val Caron, but Mi'kma'ki had gotten under her gardening nails right through to her heart. She felt a strong tidal pull back to the Atlantic coast. She moved around a bit before settling in Sin So'sepe'kapik/Bridgewater where, in 2001, she founded **Helping Nature Heal**, an award-winning company that approaches land and coastal restoration via nature-based solutions.

Early on a Friday morning, we meet at Birch Cove Park at Panuk/Lake Banook in Punamu'kwati'jk/Dartmouth, the site of a **Living Shorelines** project launched under Lohnes' direction in June 2024.

Nancy (she/her) is an Irish-Canadian seannacháí (storyteller) with an MA in documentary photography and photojournalism. She and her teen recently moved with their dog to Kijipuktuk where she's pursuing her MFA in creative nonfiction, writing a book on bogs, Bog People, death and preservation. Find out more at nancyforde.com.

These projects address shoreline issues via nature-based solutions rather than band-aid fixes that are often only temporary and sometimes negatively affect the environment rather than strengthen it. Lohnes leads me down the garden path to assess what's changed since the three-day flurry of activity when 50 volunteers showed up, shovels in hand. A gasp escapes her lips. The difference to the space of three months is pronounced.

Prior to the project breaking ground, the grass was clipped too short. Lohnes describes the exposed roots of the Grandmother Oak nearest the shore as 'wounded.' The once bereft slope that inclines down to the lake now flourishes with flowers and shrubs that blanket the tree's roots. An old rock wall, built to inhibit erosion, hugs the slope's edge. My eyes follow Lohnes' index finger as she indicates ferns, mayapples, raspberries and roses to engage the root system with mycelium and inoculants. She gestures to the spiky leaves of an iris. I tell her irises symbolize hope and we exchange smiles.

Lohnes loves incorporating heritage plants and skills within her work. The border of the wattle fence, an old English tradition, gives the wild abandon of this natural space a more intentional aesthetic. Alongside the fence, Lohnes and volunteers planted golden willows, a heritage plant that migrated with European settlers. Acadians used it for dike systems. Its stalks are flexible and, when long enough, Lohnes asks volunteers and community members to interweave the plant through the wattle. It's all part of the long-term plan. "The logs will eventually decompose leaving the natural structure of a willow border," she explains.

When the idea for the Panuk location sprouted, the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) enthusiastically came on board. Lohnes explains the process:



Golden stemmed willow is interwoven through the wattle fence and will eventually become the border once the wattle logs decompose.

PHOTO: Nancy Forde

TAKE ACTION

Visit the Living Shorelines project at Panuk/Lake Banook (Birch Cove Park), step over the fence, clear litter, report issues to HRM and weave some willow through the wattle logs! Sign up for Helping Nature Heal's newsletter to learn more: helpingnatureheal.com.

"Normally, it takes time for projects to get off the ground. NGOs must find funding. That wasn't our burden here. Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) heroically leapt in with the necessary investment. It meant we could begin right away."

For projects like Living Shorelines, the first year is critical. Community members are encouraged to join volunteer stewards in shepherding the space over three years. I ask about that duration. "On day one of the project, we planted three generations into the soil: seeds, immature plants and mature. By year three, the seeds planted become mature plants and seed the land themselves," says Lohnes. She may be CEO, but she concedes that Nature is the boss here.

Monday afternoon, I race to downtown Kjiptuk/Halifax where Andrea Brown, a Living Shorelines volunteer steward, sits patiently waiting. I order an Americano while she sings Lohnes' praises. Brown is a recent Dalhousie graduate with a joint honours degree in biology and international development. Living Shorelines is the first large-scale project she's worked. Brown volunteered over the first two days of the initial three-day launch in June. I am curious about her biggest takeaway.

"The mindfulness," she replies. "Rosmarie encouraged us to take a moment with each plant, talk to it and send good thoughts and energy into the ground with it." So much of science is cold, clinical data, but Lohnes' approach deeply resonated with Brown. I ask how she first learned about the project.

She smiles as she answers, "Mimi O'Handley."

O'Handley, wetlands and water coordinator with the EAC, has a slight tickle in her throat, so we connect online ahead of my drive to Helping Nature Heal to visit its nurseries. We discuss the Living Shorelines project and she remarks how positive it's been. A unique experience for HRM: the project has garnered more praise than complaint. O'Handley's grin widens. "It's been a win-win for everyone involved: the NGOs, government, private sector and community. Everybody's happy with it!"

I think of Grandmother Oak whose roots are now protected. "She looks happy," Lohnes says as we turn to leave the site. The tour of the project and Helping Nature Heal's headquarters is illuminating. I attribute that brightness to Lohnes' personal passion, deep knowledge and the special aura that results from upholding Nature and being upheld, in turn, by its generous, healing and sustaining reciprocity.

We lean in for a farewell hug without hesitation. The good energy from Lohnes, her volunteers and the thriving flora and fauna at Living Shorelines stays with me.