

## FREDERICKSBURG TRANSPLANT GETTING HER GREENS

### Laura Shepherd practices what she preaches

### She's one of a kind, that Laura Shepherd

Date published: 9/24/2006

By SCOTT NEAL

By SUSAN SCOTT NEAL

#### EVERYBODY DOWNTOWN KNOWS LAURA SHEPHERD.

She's that back-to-nature gal who pulls up in a big orange pickup, leaps out, crams on a floppy straw hat, grabs her tools, then works in the yard like no woman you've ever seen, pullin' weeds, diggin' holes, sawin' dead wood and draggin' branches.

She's at Hyperion knocking back coffee every morning at 8 and seems to know everybody.

You DO know, she's that gal with the long frizzy braids, always got those earth shoes on and dirt under her fingernails. She's that downtown hippie chick.

Yeah, that's Laura Shepherd.

She is one of the city's freest spirits, a single woman in her 40s who listens to her own inner voice.

It tells her to tread lightly on this earth.

So she lives simply, frugally and respectfully in a society dominated by extravagance, excess and disregard.

In the 1960s and '70s, Shepherd would have had many compatriots among the nation's ardent environmentalists and flower children who embraced the back-to-nature movement.

These days, Shepherd has friends and sympathetic spirits in the artsy, organic crowd and in other groups spanning the economic spectrum. She is, says one who knows her well, "one of a kind."

She wears old clothes and garden clogs, she twists her hair every morning into two long ropes, hay-colored and thick as hemp.

She shuns jewelry, cosmetics, creams, lotions, perfumes, antibacterial soap, sunscreen. She does not pluck or shave.

She doesn't eat meat, fast food or anything with chemicals or preservatives.

She doesn't own a TV, much less a VCR, DVD player or computer. She has a telephone but no answering machine.

She has never had a checking account, never had a credit card. Everything she has ever bought was paid for with cash, including her much-loved 1983 Ford truck, for which she paid \$700.

"Sometimes people ask me if I'm independently wealthy, and I just laugh," she said during an interview at Hyperion. "No, I'm not. I just don't have any debt, and I don't have many needs."

#### Hitting pay dirt

Shepherd has been on the downtown scene since her days at Mary Washington College in the early 1980s.

She has always lived in downtown apartments, working here and there as a waitress until she landed serendipitously at

Roxbury Mills, a garden supply store. That's where she discovered she could make a living playing in the dirt.

For years, she has supported herself by working as a freelance gardener, a job that explains the grubby fingers.

For \$25 an hour she will weed, mulch, plant, transplant, prune, trim or rake. She'll haul debris away for a few more dollars.

Shepherd works four or so hours most weekday mornings, reserving afternoons for gardening at Downtown Greens, the nonprofit, community garden she helped establish nearly a dozen years ago.

She has never advertised for clients--she said they find her by word of mouth and she makes as much money as she needs.

She could have more work if she wanted to, and if she were less selective about her clients.

"I don't work for people who are not nice to me," she said. "And I won't work for anyone unless they're willing to work alongside me. I'm not interested in coming into your garden and doing the work and getting paid and never seeing you."

Gardening should be more personal than that, she said.

### **Talk, talk, talk**

Nearly every Wednesday morning, Shepherd gardens with 88-year-old Vera Way, who owns Bazzanella Fur Shop on Caroline Street as well as other downtown property.

Sometimes Way pulls a few weeds, but often she just sits in a chair and keeps Shepherd company. And they talk, talk, talk.

"She thinks like I do. I just think the world of her," said Way, who became acquainted with Shepherd after hearing her give a gardening talk.

Way contacted Shepherd two years ago following the death of a friend who had always helped her in her yard.

"I asked Laura if she'd go on over to my other house on Caroline Street and do some things in the yard," Way said. "Laura said no, no, she wouldn't go unless I went along. So I did, and now I really look forward to it."

Shepherd also helps retired scientist Bruce Goplen with his 6¼-acre suburban garden in North Club off Tidewater Trail.

One summer morning they were struggling to remove an overgrown shrub planted too close to the foundation of his house. Goplen's white shirt was soaked in sweat and dirt. Perspiration made runny tracks down Shepherd's cheeks.

Working side by side, they sawed branches, dragged them off, and then tackled the stump, attacking it with an ax, root saw, grubbing hoe and shovel.

They grunted and pulled, dislodging the stump and sending a spray of dirt all over themselves when the roots let go.

Also that day, Shepherd helped Goplen weed borders, transplant flowers and move bushes.

"Laura knows how to move things," Goplen said. "She helped me move 12 azaleas and we haven't lost a single one."

But he and Shepherd don't see eye to eye on everything, particularly chemicals in the garden. He likes them, she doesn't.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't use a spray on those bugs," Shepherd said. "But if you want to, that's your business."

Goplen grinned.

And that was that.

### **A modern barter system**

Shepherd's gardening pays for rent, food, gas for her truck.

For lots of other things, both goods and services that most people pay for with plastic, she uses the old-fashioned barter system. That's how she affords a few luxuries, such as trips, energy massages and Hyperion, sometimes twice a day.

In exchange for unlimited cups of her favorite organic latte, she hauls away Hyperion's used coffee grounds, lugging out 25 five-gallon buckets every week. She returns them to the earth by dumping them in the compost heap at Downtown Greens.

Several years ago when she wanted to go to New Zealand for the winter, she bartered with a friend for a plane ticket.

“She had lots of frequent flyer miles, so in exchange for my ticket, I helped her do all of the things she wanted done in her yard,” she said. “I weeded and cut trees down and pulled out stumps, all kinds of things.”

Shepherd said the deal represented her own definition of a profitable transaction.

“She and I both profited,” Shepherd said. “It’s simple to work out an agreement where everybody wins. It’s about striving for a win-win mentality rather than a mentality where people are always trying to get the better of everyone else.”

A mutually beneficial relationship also exists between Shepherd and Liz Eitt of King George County. Eitt is a biopsychologist who has been involved in mind-body medicine since the 1970s.

She and her husband, Mark, donate land at their Summerbeam Farm for the Fredericksburg Area Community Supported Agriculture Project, a non-profit, cooperative garden.

Eitt has a thing for flowers and a big yard. So in exchange for gardening work, Eitt provides Shepherd with polarity therapy, a healing art involving an individual’s energy fields and electromagnetic patterns.

“We’ve learned so much from each other,” Eitt said. “Laura is a fabulous teacher. She instills an enthusiasm for learning about the earth, and she makes it easy.”

Looking toward the time when she is too old to garden for a living, Shepherd bartered for graphic work for a brochure to advertise her services as a public speaker on gardening and other eco-topics.

She has frequently spoken to garden clubs, community organizations and gardening seminars, and has discovered a gift for public speaking that she hopes will carry her through.

Tending home, garden

Shepherd has lived for years in a Charles Street apartment, above the Downtown Greens office.

She thinks she might have been waitressing at Sammy T’s when she rented the apartment for \$225 a month from Sam Emory, longtime professor at MWC and owner of Sammy T’s.

“I had gotten into weaving and I owned three looms, so I needed something big, empty, and cheap.”

The space is sparsely furnished. There is no clutter, only white walls, old wood floors, and a few adornments, including several original paintings, some handcrafted items and framed family photographs.

As unmaterialistic as she is, Shepherd treasures her furniture, not for its monetary value but because it is beautiful in its simplicity--and made by her grandfather.

She sleeps in a plain poster bed he made, keeps her clothes in his dresser and eats at his table.

Several tables and a desk were also made by his hands.

“He was a talented cabinetmaker in North Carolina who made furniture until he was 98 years old,” she said. “I inherited his things when he died at 102.”

Shepherd’s living room reveals some of her interests. She owns several dozen books. She has a big, old piano, which she bought and taught herself to play. Occasionally she gives lessons to neighborhood children, who drop in frequently to visit.

And all around the ceiling, perched on a strip of molding, are different sorts and sizes of scissors, a quirky collection she can’t explain.

“Don’t ask me why. I just have a thing for scissors.”

By herself in the evenings, Shepherd cooks her supper, then might play piano or pick up her guitar and write some music.

She loves to read, and regularly looks at the new-arrival section at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library.

She’s a picky reader, though.

“I don’t want to read about anything negative or heavy. And nothing by Stephen King. How can anybody be entertained reading that horrible stuff?”

Nearly every night she sits at her kitchen table and does some kind of artwork.

Her latest project, begun this summer, is 100 drawings inside circles.

### **Downtown girl**

From her kitchen window on the back of the house, Shepherd can look out over the inner-city garden she helped create as a community service project to satisfy requirements for her Master Gardener certification.

The garden is a lush retreat in the center of an area of low-income housing in the area of the original Walker-Grant School, where many of her neighbors are longtime residents.

Shepherd says she was the first white person to move into the traditionally black neighborhood many years ago after deciding to stay in Fredericksburg after graduating from Mary Washington.

Actually, she says she really didn't "decide" to live here. "It just happened. I had a big dog and she loved it here. There was the river to swim in, and I'd lived near the river off-campus during college, and I had friends here, and it just happened."

Shepherd majored in studio art, not because she had ever done anything artsy, but because she'd gotten an A in a pottery class she took for fun, and she learned that art majors had to write fewer papers than other students.

She recalled that there was crime in the neighborhood, but she wasn't deterred.

"They used to sell cocaine on my front porch," she said. "People were shot right on the sidewalk when drug deals went bad. But I was never afraid here. I got along just great with my neighbors, and they were OK with me, too."

Shepherd caused a little consternation when she decided to do some gardening out back, though, she said.

At the time, the ground was nasty and not suitable for gardening, she said, so she and a friend put plants in a hanging basket made of chicken wire and hung them on the fence.

"One of the neighbors got upset. In fact, he was so distraught he called the police. Anything out of the ordinary concerned him.

"So the police came. They looked around and saw what I was doing and they said they thought it was OK. They talked to the neighbor and finally got him all settled down. I'm still not sure what he was objecting to."

Neighbors didn't think a community garden on vacant property behind the houses was such a good idea either: "They said the kids would tear it up."

But she and Lisa Biever, co-founder of Downtown Greens, stuck with it and even got the neighborhood children involved. Today Downtown Greens owns the land and has even expanded across the street.

The award-winning project still maintains its original goals: to provide green space, environmental education and youth activities. The gardens are a park-like respite with shady paths and benches.

Needless to say, Downtown Greens is organic. Bugs and butterflies are safe from pesticides. Weeds disappear the old-fashioned way--by hand.

### **Trying not to get burned**

Shepherd has strong opinions about things big and small.

Take sunscreen, for example. She refuses to use it because "nobody really knows what the chemicals in that stuff will do to you. Sure, it might keep you from getting sunburned, but it might also make you sick one day years from now. Who knows?"

She prefers to take her chances with long-sleeved shirts and wide-brimmed hats.

Never married, and childless, Shepherd has been free to feed herself exactly as she pleases.

Her diet consists mainly of organic produce, along with whole grains from the health food store and whole-milk yogurt from a local producer.

Most of her vegetables come from either Downtown Greens or the Community Supported Agriculture project.

Every few weeks she makes a trip to the grocery store for extra-virgin olive oil, cold-pressed.

Empty olive-oil bottles get recycled, along with any paper or plastic that finds its way into her kitchen. Inedible vegetable matter goes into the compost heap.

As hard as she tries to reuse and recycle, she still has some trash that will wind up in a landfill, much to her regret.

“Every couple of weeks I have to take out a small bag.”

### **Fredericksburg, via France**

Shepherd shrugs off a question about her lifestyle and how it came about.

“I have no idea,” she says.

At least a couple of her friends point to an unconventional childhood and parents who exposed her to intellectual curiosity, art, culture and the larger world.

Born in France, Shepherd learned to speak both French and English as a toddler, and she still loves conversing in French whenever she gets the chance.

She is one of two children born to American parents who met and married in France.

Her father was teaching history and her mother was an artist for a cartography lab.

Born in Kansas, her father grew up in Oregon where he went to live with an aunt after his mother died when he was 5 years old. He was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford. Her mother’s roots are in rural Ashe County, N.C., where she inherited her cabinetmaker father’s appreciation for art.

The family also lived in Thailand and Switzerland before moving to Northern Virginia.

Shepherd graduated from Arlington High School, then entered Mary Washington as a freshman in 1979. She took a break to do some traveling, returning to graduate in 1986.

Since then she has created a way of life for herself that is sparse and simplistic but rich in personal satisfaction.

“I have everything a person could want. People make a living cleaning all the stuff out of other people’s garages. That just doesn’t make sense to me.”