

# Published in *Fungi Magazine*, Volume 11:3 Special Edition 2018 devoted to memories and photos of Gary and his thousands of fans and friends!

by Dianna Smith (NEMF President 2014-2018)

Gary was such a unique person with such a big sunny personality and influence on the growth of amateur mycology throughout the North America, but especially here in the northeast, that he will continue to live on vividly in our lives. Gary had many tens of thousands of fans of all ages and no detractors. Everyone loved him – even Martha Stewart! If you met Gary once, you were friends from then onward. If he saw you for the second time at a foray a year later, he would remember and acknowledge you with a huge grin, a wave and maybe even a warm hug. He listened attentively to questions, no matter how silly we thought he might consider them. He always responded thoughtfully, and usually was able to connect and amplify his answer with the addition of a funny experience or tale. Gary was especially gifted in storytelling. I often described him to others as the ‘Woody Allen’ of mycology (except he never exhibited any of the psychological problems one may associate with the actor/director). He was encouraging and contagiously inspiring. He could also be disciplined coach – letting you know there was always much more to learn. He was driven to challenge everyone, from the professional to the rankest newbie, to look deeper into the subject of fungi and their interactions with the ecosystem.

Besides learning continuously more about plants and fungi and teaching roughly two thousand classes at the NYBG on them, (and being heralded as the ‘Instructor of the Year’ more times than anyone else in NYBG teaching history), he was inspired by his knowledge of philosophy, Shakespeare’s plays, and the writings of poets and naturalists of the past and present. His deepest devotion was to his family, especially his wife Irene and son Noah. So many of us were fortunate enough to have spent time and a snack or meal in their garden-level apartment on NYC’s upper west side, while working on a comedic play he wrote or dance involving fungi characters to be performed at a meeting or foray. Living in close proximity to Central Park, Gary spent years studying its fungal and plant-life – alone, accompanied with wife, Irene, NYMS members, world-renowned mycologists and occasional visitors like myself. He also knew every plant and tree at the NYBG and enjoyed photographing and posting seasonal expressions of nature’s cycles on Facebook. He knew and thought about the different fungi that appeared over the years in its wood-mulched landscaped gardens and woodland forests. He was a founder of the annual Telluride Fungus Festival and attended, talked at, and led the event since its inception. Last year, parade attendees all dressed up as Gary Lincoff.

He will be fondly and frequently remembered by everyone who has ever crossed paths with him.

Everyone has a story about their relationship with Gary, even if they have met him just once. This is my story – in brief. Soon after joining the Connecticut-Westchester Mycological

Association (COMA) in Westchester County, NY, I met Gary Lincoff, Ursula Hoffman, Don Shernoff, Sandy and Jerry Sheine, Roz Lowen and many other wonderful members to whom I remain close to this day. This happened while attending my first annual late fall COMA pot luck dinner in 2002. Gary had already seen and passed judgement on three videos devoted to field guides, basket, wax paper bags, knife, etc. – everything we need to have to attend a mushroom walk. The second and third show were on the mushrooms the COMA group found that day and commentary on their characteristics. These were created for my NY-Connecticut weekly half-hour cable television show, SCAPES. During the taping of my introduction to mycology videos narrated by COMA treasurer and Foray Chair, Don Shernoff (father of Leon Shernoff, editor of the magazine *Mushroom: The Journal of Wild Mushrooming*), I fell in love with the beauty, colors, shapes and diversity of the mushrooms seen that late autumn afternoon in 2001 at Tallman State Park. At his recommendation and the request of NAMA Education Chairperson and the first COMA president, Sandy Sheine, I created a one-hour tape and DVD for the North American Mycological Association for beginners to borrow, rent or buy. So, when I met Gary at the COMA pot-luck dinner for the first time, we were officially introduced and became immediate associates. In subsequent years, I taped every presentation he gave at COMA meetings, annual COMA Forays and at various annual multi-day forays throughout the north and southeast, and with his permission aired them regularly on my show. I must have 100 half-hour shows on mycology as a result of our friendship.

Gary was also a dear empathetic friend. I will always remember his taking time out of his busy life to trek across the city to give me a surprise visit at the Hospital for Special Surgery, while I waited in an oversized blue gown to be rolled down the hall for my second hip-replacement surgery. We also shared a close friendship with Ursula Hoffmann, former President of the Northeast Mycological Federation (NEMF), and a long-time member of NAMA, COMA and the NYMS. She, the Sheines and other founders of COMA had known Gary since he first became enthused with fungi and before he was given the daunting task of writing the *Audubon Field Guide to Mushrooms of North America*. All of these people had been turned on to fungi after taking an adult course on the topic with 'Mushroom Guru' Sam Ristich, for whom the NEMF Forays are now dedicated. Sam and all the students who took that course played a part in what was popularly referred to as the 'Bible' of fungi. It was Ursula, in fact, who dreamed up the new and uncommon 'common name' he used in the book for *Hypomyces lactifluorum*– the "Lobster Mushroom." Together that small group of people with various educational backgrounds became long-time close and supportive friends, who individually and together helped found or greatly enhance the creation of mycological clubs in each of the states and Canadian provinces in northeast North America. Almost all of them have also made substantial contributions to the growth of the North American Mycological Association. Ursula worked with Gary on various projects, including the recording and publishing of the annual NEMF and COMA foray collection records on the NEMF website she created – while also tending her orchids and teaching at Lehman College in the Bronx. She came over from Germany as a teenager and went to Smith College in my current hometown of Northampton, MA. Given her thick accent, it was hard to imagine her teaching an undergraduate English literature course while there, but she did. All three of us worked on COMA forays together and on all the NEMF Forays as well. The two of them spent the better part of a year trying to convince me to sign up for the annual 2012

NAMA Foray in California near Christmas in southern California. Unknown to me, I was to be given the NAMA President's Award for taking over the *Mycophile*, and NAMA's Harry and Elsie Knighton Service Award. I was told it was the only time one person ever received two awards. I heard it was an awesome foray – even without me. Ursula had better luck convincing me to replace her as NEMF President. Well, actually she never convinced me. She just insisted I was the only one responsible enough to take it over. Good thing she can't see me now! I also recreated a modernized website for NEMF, which features among other treasures her writings on how to conduct forays, and Gary's lessons for beginners and intermediate students of mycology. Ursula passed a couple of years ago and has been dearly missed by many of us, including her ever-constant friend, Gary Lincoff.

I accompanied Gary closely on many mushroom walks and multi-day forays, stood in for him at two or three NAMA forays to announce and distribute awards to extraordinary mycologists and mycophiles, drove him to the Mid-Hudson Mycological Association to give a presentation, participated in a NY Bio-Blitz with him, loaned him a book on polypores, filmed and edited his walks around fungi display tables while fans gathered around him to hear his insights about the rotting mushrooms spread out in morphological groups on a series of long paper-covered folding tables. Unfortunately, I was always behind the camera and so I don't have any photos of us standing together, although I am sure others do. I didn't think to ask someone else to take a shot of the two of us, but I admit I was a closet Gary groupie. I spent the better part of one-year scanning, digitizing and editing many hundreds of his slides for use in his book, *The Complete Mushroom Hunter* and was honored to have so many of my own photos of fungi included as well as my name on the front cover. Our most important project together involved the creation of COMA's Mushroom University around 2006. I met with him at the New York Botanical Garden following one of his classes to discuss his possibly teaching an annual course each spring for members. I wanted us all to be more knowledgeable about fungi than we were. I was also concerned that if I ever left the organization, there would be no one to take over fungi identification beyond what the oldest and most committed members already knew. He excitedly accepted the challenge and took the Metro-North train from Manhattan to Croton on Hudson where either I or someone else nearby picked him up and drove him to our 'classroom' and back again at the end of each session. Four to five hours of his time was spent just travelling back and forth to expose us to his relaxed teaching style. He devoted five or six Saturdays each in spring to teaching us and in addition to many weeks at his desk in preparation for each topic. The first year we consisted of about 8 or 9 people sitting tightly together around a Rena Wertzler's dining room table at her home in White Plains. To accommodate expanding interest in joining the program, we moved the operation to my slightly more spacious open-concept dining-living room-foyer for a several years placing one portable table after another in a long line, surrounded by about 30 or so folding chairs. The year or so before I left COMA to move to MA, we made a deal with Westchester County Parks to have our six sessions for free in their larger one-room building at Muscoot Farm in Katonah, NY in return for leading just two walks a year for them.

When Gary walked into the first M.U. session of 2018 he was not well. He felt badly that the class didn't go the way he hoped it would. He was exhausted but carried on. It must have been difficult for him to feel he had to ask Carol McLeod to find other capable people to fill in

for him for the remaining scheduled workshops. He needed to preserve his strength for a foray to Chile he organized that was to take place in a month or so. Carol asked me and Bill Yule to take over some classes and I recommended getting Noah Seigel too, which she did. Bill was scheduled to give a lesson on Saturday March 9, but a strong snow storm with high winds had come through his area knocking down trees onto the impassable roads. Roy Halling, the lead mycologist at the NYBG, readily offered to take over the class. When Gary found out, he insisted he was feeling good and up to filling in for Roy, who was filling in for Bill, who was filling in for Gary! The class went well. He was physically weak, but mentally and emotionally energetic, informative and entertaining. He probably succeeded into continuing to fool many in the class into thinking he was getting better. Gary never complained about pain he felt, or even talked about his health to anyone, except perhaps for a close few. So, it was a shock to thousands of followers to learn of his death by emails, by Facebook posts, or by the news. I wasn't surprised, but I was stunned. I had been thinking he would be unlikely to survive the upcoming mushroom foray season, especially since he committed to leading more of them than in any previous year. That was Gary. He did as much as he could to fully live his life and be a positive force for amateur mycology until he literally dropped. Two days after giving his final workshop, he collapsed at home with Irene by his side due to a sudden massive stroke. He remained unconscious until dying Friday evening in the hospital. It is now four weeks since Gary gave his last class. I just returned from presenting a course to 2018 members of COMA's Mushroom University course on gilled mushrooms. The topic of the day's lesson was russulas and lactarius. It was based on a course I originally took with Gary several years ago and have since continuously updated and expanded upon. As a 'substitute teacher' for COMA's Mushroom University, I was pleased to be able stand in for my mentor. It felt good to learn on departing that COMA's Mushroom University will continue with his student-associates taking the reins. Next year I will be giving a talk for them on the topic of Medicinal Fungi. I am especially happy that so many of our Pioneer Valley Mycological Association members regularly participate in Fungi Kingdom University programs – and have the opportunity to learn from a devoted student and others who learned from the best.

When I told Gary my husband Howard and I had found a home in Massachusetts where we could retire near my daughter, Gary tried to talk me out of leaving NY and COMA. That was five years ago. Since then we rekindled our relationship sporadically at various NEMF forays, and through email and Facebook. Ever since Michael Ostrowski and I started the PVMA in western Massachusetts, we talked about asking Gary and Irene to take a train or bus up from New York City and to stay with us for a few days. I wanted to introduce all of our members to him, have him give us a talk and accompany us on walks to our favorite sites. Regrettably, our club really wasn't able in the first three years to pay him enough to make it worth the time and effort of coming up to spend three or four days with us. I hoped they could come in August or September during these past two years when we have lots of mushrooms in our region of the country. Unfortunately for us, he was always booked solid sometimes a couple of years in advance. No free weekends were available to share his knowledge and stories with us. I believe he accepted virtually every invitation from clubs in the northeast to serve as Chief Mycologist and had to turn down others. There was no time to waste and so much inspiration to pass on.

Fortunately, some of our members have had the distinctly warm pleasure of meeting Gary within the past three years at a NEMF or COMA foray.

Gary will continue to live on through those who have known him. I will remember how easy it was to talk with him. I will remember his comedic sense of humor about human behavior, his funny stories about by-gone mycologists who influenced him, our frequent laughter. I will continue to learn on my own as he did and as he urged those who met him. As Sam Ristich's teaching on fungi inspired Gary and so many other founders of mycology groups in the northeast, so Gary will continue to inspire all of us – through his books, and through those of us who learned from and with him. I am committed to continue in his footsteps and work toward advancing our appreciation for and an ever deeper understanding of fungi and their interactions through time with mutually dependent plants, insects, bacteria and animals like us. I imagine his final thoughts to us would be to keep learning about fungi and their associated organisms; live every moment to the fullest, make smart choices, love and support each other, and be thankful. Fun, friends, and fungi!