Mari Hill Harpur has always possessed a passion for trees. She credits this passion to having grown up enriched by foresters and a forestry community that supported her both as friends and mentors. Howard Dow, a longtime forester friend and an early planner of her family’s Douglas-fir seed orchard, once said: “I never met a tree I did not like.” Mari’s attitude epitomizes this sentiment.

Her introduction to sustainable forestry was in 1956 when she was six years old and visiting the family forest in Sweet Home, Oregon, in the Cascade Mountains. Douglas-fir trees towered above her as she collected their fallen cones from the forest floor. These cones later produced the seedlings for the future Mason Seed Orchard and were subsequently planted across the Hill Timber Interests.

The namesake of the orchard, David T. Mason, was well-known in the forestry community and became a friend and mentor to Mari and her family. Under his guidance, the family forest was reinvented as a successful sustained yield forest, one of the first such managed forests in the Pacific Northwest. Another friend and mentor, Dr. Carl Newport, whom Mari described as an “incredibly bright” forest economist, worked for Mason’s consulting company, Mason, Bruce & Girard, for 30 years. He also served as director of the World Forestry Center, and in 1995, he nominated Mari to assume this leadership position.

When presented with the request, Mari remembered thinking, “Why would they want to do that?” But, Carl reassured her that she was qualified. Mari was delighted to accept the offer and served as a World Forestry Center director for the next 20 years. From 2003-2006, she served as their chair, which was “something I hadn’t expected at all,” she recalled. “I found it fascinating to be the first female chair amongst brilliant and motivated people who made forestry decisions for the global community. It was an honor to be among the leaders of our industry, and it taught me about good corporate governance.”

Mari has fond memories from this time. “We took remarkable trips, and to have the occasion to travel with individuals who were experienced foresters was such a valuable opportunity. We visited Costa Rica, Malaysia, Portugal, France, Lithuania, Canada, and New Zealand, and we were given an excellent understanding of how the world’s forests interact. Every trip was an adventure! As a result of these expeditions and with constant interaction with forestry colleagues, I began to see the world’s forests in a different light.” On those trips, she started using colored tree tape to identify her luggage and knew then she had found her true vocation.

While being director and chair of the World Forestry Center solidified her passion, Mari’s first enterprise into forestry actually began decades earlier after graduating from Bishop’s University in 1971. She purchased a Christmas tree farm in eastern Quebec and lived there for a few years—long enough to realize she loved planting trees. “There must be part tree in me,” she mused.

Following her marriage to Doug Harpur, which is now in its 40th year, they started an organic composting company in 1977 that later became known as Organix. In the early days, Mari and Doug made and packaged the compost themselves on the tarmac of an abandoned airport in Ontario, Canada. At the height of their company’s success, their product was distributed from St. Pierre and Miquelon in eastern Canada to British Columbia. They sold their company in 1993 along with its five distribution centers. Believing themselves retired, Mari and Doug found their future business venture through a strange quirk of fate.

Twelve years earlier, they had visited New Zealand, where many of Doug’s family lived. As Mari remembered it, “Doug picked up a funny little book about deer farming and he went absolutely over the top about the idea of farming deer. He was determined to do that in Canada.” They already owned a farm in Quebec and during those early years they began fencing and organizing the pastures into a deer farm that would become their retirement project. In 1988 the first of their herd was born from New Zealand to eastern Canada and formed the foundation of what is today regarded as an outstanding European red deer herd operating under the business entity Harpur Farms LLC. Before long, their venison business had emerged as a first-class enterprise. Marketed under the Cerf de Botanie label, the product is today served in exclusive restaurants in Montreal, New York, Ottawa, Toronto, and Vancouver, B.C. In addition to their Canadian deer farms, which are the largest red deer farms in North America, they also have two red deer farms in New Zealand.

Putting down their roots in New Zealand was driven by their desire to be closer to Doug’s family and because of Mari’s passion for trees. “Right away I fell in love with New Zealand,” Mari said. “It’s very similar to Oregon; the rainfall is similar, and there are beautiful mountains, lovely coastlines and seas, and, of course, the trees.” In 2000, they purchased a high-country station and planted trees and planned for livestock. Within five years, a brand-new forest of seven million Douglas-fir seedlings was growing on New Zealand’s South Island. Today, their red deer farms and forests are well-known entities.

In 2013, Mari and Doug undertook a new forest stewardship endeavor with the purchase and investment in Kenauk Nature, a 64,000-acre boreal forest in Quebec whose documented history stretches back to 1674. Today, the property is part of a greenspace corridor that extends from the Canadian border to the Arctic Circle. In addition to maintaining its current forestry operations, a hunting and fishing outfitting business, and a fish hatchery, they established a conservation plan that balances future development and conservation. In conjunction with three other partners and a corporate partner, Nature Conservancy Canada, they initiated a program that extends over a one-hundred-year horizon. To achieve this vision, Mari and Doug established the Kenauk Institute. Its primary purpose is protecting and preserving the property and its watershed while conducting a massive biological inventory. Their involvement with the project, Mari says, “It’s been very successful and very exciting. We are working with a dozen educational institutions to produce reference papers and resource materials for students and university graduates.

In 2017, we had sixteen research projects and seven well-established educational programs.”

Equally important in Mari’s life is the arts. Her photographs have appeared in over 40 exhibitions and several publications. Her subject matter reflects her enthusiasm for the natural world and iconic landscapes in traditional black and white images. She is often found photographing their properties in all kinds of weather and conditions, and her distinctive theme is red deer portraits. In 2015, Mari wrote and published Sea Winter Salmon: Chronicles of the St. John River. The book details her family’s five-generation legacy of managing this sensitive river environment in eastern Canada. In addition, through her involvement in two foundations, Mari has supported emerging artists, scholars, artistic leaders, and fellows.

As a past trustee of The Camargo Foundation and a member of The Jerome Foundation, Mari works to promote and create lasting relationships within the wider artistic community. Memorable moments in Mari’s life are many, but one that stands out is her naming day by the Blackfoot Nation into the Old Person family. Following in the footsteps of her grandfathers, Louis Warren Hill Sr. and father, Louis Warren Hill Jr., Mari was adopted into their tribe in 1965. Jim Reeves Jr. presented Mari with the adult name of Chis-stuk-kad-kii, the name of her great-grandmother. Translated as “Beaver Woman,” Chis-stuk-kad-kii was the wife of Big Nose, the chief of the Piegans, a branch of the Blackfoot. Chis-stuk-kad-kii was a brave woman, hunter, and a formidable warrior who rode with her husband to battle. Mari is privileged to protect and respect her autochthonous name.

Today, much of the day-to-day operations of their companies are handled by Mari’s daughter Sara Maud, son-in-law Robert Varrieur, and nephew Jordan Harpur. Mari now considers herself mostly retired, although she doesn’t hesitate to admit it’s a struggle to remain so. She stays involved with running the North Oaks Company, which Doug and she purchased in 1995 from her father’s estate. Located on 6,000 acres north of St. Paul, Minnesota, the property includes a senior’s campus, a conservation area overseen by the Minnesota Land Trust, approximately five thousand residents, and some small commercial entities. All facilities reflect the natural environment of the local indigenous oak savanna in a pristine setting.

In reflecting back upon her life’s work, Mari acknowledges the many contributions of her mentors, “I am so fortunate to have had the opportunities that my family and education provided. Fortunately, my curiosity helped me to implement what I have learned and to focus on enduring business relationships and committed participation. Although I have been involved with developing and running several businesses, they represent a common theme: sustainable land management and passionate fulfillment. This concept has constantly guided my executive approach. I love the land. I want to help continue to improve our presence here, to protect the land and the forests while living with it, on it, and in it. We are all partners together and have a responsibility to enrich our human and natural environment in a balanced manner.”