

the lady in the woods

Medium Concetta Bertoldi not only sees dead people, she talks with them, too, relaying messages from one world to another

BY KATHLEEN N. WEBBER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES SALZANO

I hadn't talked to my father in more than 36 years before the day I met with the Lady in the Woods. I was 7 when I woke one morning and he was gone. Not satisfied with clinical explanations, I waited daily by the kitchen door, looking for his car to pull in. At night I stood watch in his office, hoping he'd show up. Months later I resigned myself to wishing for an apparition. Maybe he would come to me in a dream. He never did. I long ago gave up on hearing from him again.

Concetta Bertoldi has heard a tale like mine many a time. Bertoldi, a 52-year-old medium from Boonton Township, has seen dead people and received messages from them her whole life. For years she kept her secret close, but in 1998 she went public. Six months later she was booked to do readings for the next three years. Now she counts celebrities and royalty among her clients, has a two-book deal and TV show in the works.

I learned of Bertoldi from a handful of well-educated tristate residents who had gone to see her and were astounded by her accuracy in detailing descriptions of family members who had died.

Curious from a personal standpoint

and a professional one, I approached our meeting like I did other interviews, reporter's notebook in one hand, recorder in the other. This time I also carried a healthy dose of skepticism. Although Patricia Arquette has put a hip spin on the idea in her prime-time role on the TV show "Medium," I wondered about mediums' validity and what exactly they brought to the table of humanity if not a constant longing for those gone.

After spending all morning negotiating the roads of North Jersey, I was convinced Bertoldi was part of the witness protection program. Sleepy town with apathetic residents not willing to give directions? Check. Unending turns around hilly knolls and glens? Check. House buried in the woods? Check. As I drove onto the steep, climbing driveway that led to her home and office, I was half expecting the Addams family manse to appear and a storm to break out.

When I got out of the car, my heart started to beat faster as I wondered what she might see or hear when she met me. Bertoldi's childhood friend Elena greeted me at the front door. Her days are filled booking appointments. Another one of Bertoldi's pals of over

40 years, Cornelia, affectionately known as "Mushy," acts as an agent of sorts, booking public appearances in New Jersey and in Mexico, where Bertoldi is a minor celebrity. She also manages Bertoldi's website.

When Bertoldi rounds the corner, my nervousness is gone. She grabs my hand and shakes it with such vigor I am jolted into the moment. Tall, blonde, and sassy, with Mae West's va-va-voom and Bette Midler's wit, she is the boisterous new friend you love right away because she fills the room with her high energy and always-game attitude.

I am whisked up the stairs to begin an impromptu tour of her home. "This place looks like Sardi's, doesn't it?" she says, pointing to the signed headshots and other photos of Fergie, Alec Baldwin, members of The Grateful Dead, *Sopranos* cast members, Jeff Goldblum, and Ed Begley Jr., on the wall amid the Mexican-inspired décor.

For someone who deals with the business of the dead, Bertoldi is far more bouncy than you might expect. "I didn't want people to come into a waiting area that was a downer," she explains. "The Mexican people are very



Medium Concetta Bertoldi just outside her home in Boonton Township. She is known by many as "The Lady in the Woods".

religious, and the colors they use are so full of life, so I did this.”

In Mexico, Bertoldi appears on the Talina Fernandez show (Fernandez is the Oprah of Mexico), and her appearances have proven to be so popular, her agent in Los Angeles is working on the pilot of her own in Mexico.

“There are things that are part of destiny,” she says matter-of-factly. “This [her skills as a medium] is part of mine.” She zips through the house, showing me the guest room where clients from California and beyond stay. Boxes of angels are stacked in a corner. Many people call her their angel and present her with all kinds to thank her. “People are very generous,” she says. “Sometimes I get tired of people saying I am saintly. I don’t want to be put on a pedestal. I don’t have a gift. I like to call it an ability. I am a messenger.”

We settle into her large sunny kitchen and discuss that ability. “When I was a little girl I heard dead people. I never remember not hearing them. But back then you did not question authority,” says Bertoldi, whose mother is Irish and whose father was Italian. “My father’s father had this ability and told my father he’d have a daughter who would have it too. So he accepted it. My mother didn’t

until one day I heard a voice telling me my uncle was hurt. My mother shooed me away, but then the phone rang and she got the news.” Bertoldi says her mother never dismissed her ramblings again.

Although her ability has been a gift to many it has sometimes been a curse, she says. At 10 she learned she would never have children (married for 23 years, she has remained childless). At about the same age, she found out from “the other side” that her brother would die young. “I watched him like a hawk after that,” she says. “I couldn’t take my eyes off of him.” In 1981 she was reading an article in *People* magazine about a new disease that was as yet unnamed and was killing gay men. “I knew right then this is what he would die of,” she says. “He was gone not long after that.”

Bertoldi says she was not an accomplished student, unless you count her performance in history class. “I always got help from the other side. Teachers could not figure it out,” she says with a laugh. After she graduated from high school, she took administrative positions, and in one such job she had her first brush with celebrity. When Joe DiMaggio came into the office she worked in, Marilyn Monroe walked in with him. “She reached out to me and said, ‘Tell him about the missing stone.’ I couldn’t believe it. I love Marilyn Monroe, but I knew if I asked Mr. DiMaggio about it I would lose my job. I told friends but never said anything. Years later I went to the sale in New York of some of her things, and her wedding band was there and it had a missing stone. I couldn’t believe it. That’s what Marilyn was talking about.”

“This little tape is like a postcard from the other side.’ I take credit only for being the messenger.”

When Bertoldi was 22, her boyfriend took her to be tested at the Edgar Cayce Institute in Virginia Beach. Cayce was one of the most documented psychics. “I didn’t know there was a name for what I had,” she explains. After a battery of tests, she was labeled clairvoyant. Psychics reputedly can look into the future, and a medium can do that by conversing with the other side.

Time passed, and Bertoldi thought long and hard about coming out to the general public. “People in this day and age are more open to this now,” she says. “You still never know how people are going to take it when I tell them something. With some people, it scares them. But there is nothing scary about it.”

She was raised Catholic but is no longer devout. She says she believes in God and an afterlife free of pain. Never preachy, she says simply, “We are here to love each other despite our different religions.

“I don’t believe there are sections up there where God puts us,” she says with great comedic timing, arms flailing. “‘OK, this is where the Methodists go, then the Catholics.’ I don’t believe it’s like that.”

Her husband, John, an atheist, says his wife has helped people find their religion, even if that is just a belief in the afterlife. “He’ll say to me, ‘You have helped thousands of people. They tell me they can sleep better because the pain isn’t eating at them anymore,’” she says.

In a tale reminiscent of an Edgar Allan Poe story, Bertoldi says she found out the day before her father was hospitalized for routine surgery that he would not survive the next day. The message came in the form of a human pounding at her front door in the middle of the



night. When she opened the door, her visitor was on all fours: a white sheepdog who walked away from the house and into the night. She says she knew the dog was no stray but a sign her father was being called back to the flock. Within 24 hours her father passed away.

Luckily, she is still close to her father, from the other side. "It is the only way I could have survived," she says.

Her regular clients express similar sentiments. When Jeff Goldblum was working on a movie in Pittsburgh with Ed Begley Jr., he flew Bertoldi out to do a bit part, and she did readings for both. Begley was a newcomer. "I said to Ed, 'Do you know Marlon Brando, because he is speaking to me and calling you beloved son?' He got hysterical. It turns out they were best friends."

It is common that her news brings people to tears, but she contends that it has the opposite effect, too. "I love seeing joy in people's faces when there was so much sorrow," she says. She has reunited spouses, parents to children, and friends to friends.

When Bertoldi conducts a reading, she offers to tape-record it. For one thing, she says that after the communication she does not remember what she has said. "As soon as it comes out of my mouth, I don't remember a thing," she explains. Her state is otherworldly. "I tell people, 'Take the tape home and listen to it, and see what information unfolds. This little tape is like a postcard from the other side.' I take credit only for being the messenger."

But I don't push the button quick enough when she starts to tell me what my father has to say. I can only scribble at a furious pace and confirm details of the conversation later with my mother. This is my impromptu reading, and I want to hear more. After all, it has been years, and while tears come easily there is comfort too, in hearing from my father.

Now I know why everyone wants to talk to the Lady in the Woods. You just have to find her first.

