

# A place to get next to nature

by Jean Berns Jones

For 41 years, the Friendship Center has offered a place for people to get close to nature, to reflect, relax, and learn.

Since 1976, the rustic children's camp and retreat center has been located off of Evans Quarry Road in rural Dodgeville. There its lodge and two bunkhouses are nestled in lush forest on the side of a steep hill, with a backdrop of craggy, rock outcroppings and overlooking a lovely valley.

Just touring the place and walking along the sun-dappled trails between the buildings is a beautiful, relaxing experience. In fact, this land in Canyon Park Creek Valley is so special that it was once considered for inclusion in Governor Dodge State Park.

Imagine how its abundance of natural beauty would look to a disadvantaged child from Milwaukee – a child who had never known an environment other than the concrete corridors of the city.

Thanks to the efforts of many volunteers and donors who sustain the Friendship Center, hundreds of children have been gifted with this experience. Each summer, 12 youths from Milwaukee, Iowa County and other areas of Wisconsin, come to the week-long Friendship Center Camp.

"We try to get kids here who wouldn't have this experience if it were not given to them," explained Gretchen Pearson, who is caretaker of the center along with her husband, Dave Pearson. Donated camperships cover the \$200 fee for most of the children, although a few local families pay their own way.

"Many generous people from this area and other places send checks," Gretchen added. "It has always worked out. We've never turned anyone away and we don't plan to."



Gretchen and Dave Pearson pose on the deck of a bunkhouse at Friendship Center in rural Dodgeville.

an elementary principal when he retired. Then Gretchen, who was teaching at the UW-Milwaukee, made the weekend commute to Iowa County for a year before she also retired.

The Friendship Center founders enjoyed nature and outdoor activities and they set out to develop an outdoor retreat to provide a quiet, intimate environment for inner-city youth to work on their reading skills and learn first-hand about the natural world.

"We feel camping can help orient students to aspire to achieve, and be a positive influence in their lives, when we combine nature and instruction along with typical camping experiences," Dave ex-

plained. Friendship Center bought the current 28 acres seven miles northwest of Dodgeville. Operation of the non-profit center was relocated, with Dave as president.

During the few years that the lodge and bunkhouses were being built, almost entirely by volunteers, Friendship Center summer camps were held at Folklore Village and the Governor Dodge Park group camp.

A typical day for the group of 12 diverse campers, ages 9-12, consists of reading activities in the morning and recreational activities in the afternoon and evening. The camp operates like a family with everyone cooking, eating, and doing chores together.

Staffing the camp full-time this year were Camp Director Karen Tennesen, Jane and Vince Kavaloski, Shah Hamadan Khan, Andrew Koerber, Elisheva Pront, and Dave, Gretchen and Julie Pearson. Part-time staff were Tom Boehm, Jessica Gobel, Judy Kingsbury, Louisa Hoessel, Thu & Le Phan, Kacy Sporle, and Becky, Elizabeth and Tom Jones.

The group gathers each morning to read and discuss folktales from around the world. The themes reinforce the values of Friendship Center Camp – speaking kindly, building bridges, developing character, resolving conflicts, making a difference in the world.

"By recruiting caring, volunteer adults we have always been able to keep a low adult/child ratio having a large family atmosphere that provides a life changing positive influence on the lives of campers," Dave said.

Recognizing "acts of kindness" among each other is a theme of nightly gatherings. Each camper receives ten beautiful shells when they arrive, and each evening they give away a shell to campers they think have done an act of kindness. Each youth goes home with a bag of shells initialized by the other campers to remember their friendships with each other.

"It is our hope that because of their week at Friendship Center Camp, the campers will be more aware of doing acts of kindness to those around them," said Jane and Vince Kavaloski. "We also hope that they will have a deeper commitment to protect the beauty and wonders of nature and will continue to work with others to create a more peaceful world."

The recreational activities include swimming every day (with swim instruction) at both Governor Dodge Park lakes; hiking every day (Cox Hollow Lake, Lost Canyon, Stephens Falls, a dark cave); horseback walks and hayride; beach games, canoeing across Twin Valley Lake; learning about archery; crafts; drama; learning about the dark night sky through telescopes; picnics; evening campfires with songs and games...and more.

The camp kitchen menu is somewhat like an "international café."

Among the food items prepared last summer were Chinese Spring Rolls, Indian Vegetable Curry Spring Rolls, Sabzi ki Daal (vegetable lentil soup), Chapatti flat bread, Chai spiced milk tea, Chicken Satay, and peanut sauce.

"While curious and a little hesitant about ingredients they had not heard about – ever – they followed directions and recipes, worked hard together as teams, tasted the unknown, and declared their creations fantastic," Gretchen said.

The facilities have been improved over the years with a lot of volunteer help, including some labor provided by the Wisconsin Conservation Corps.

The Center for Independence in Milwaukee uses the camp for a month during the summer. During the rest of the year, Friendship Center is used as a retreat center to help pay for its operation. More information is at: friendshipcenter-wi.org.

Small, non-profit groups or families are welcome to rent the facilities for weekends or longer periods. It is a natural choice for small groups of adults, young people, teachers or leaders to enjoy a family-like environment. The site is ideal for ecological studies, scientific investigations, problem solving, journal writing, social interactions, reading, teamwork, and other studies.

The facilities are open year 'round for two night stays or longer. Last year in February, an outdoor adventure club came from the University of Indiana. They drove in after dark and hauled their gear uphill to the lodge in sleds.



Even doing dishes can be fun when you're among friends. A Friendship Center founder, Mary Bunge, is shown washing dishes with campers in the lodge kitchen.

bunkhouses is equipped with electric and wood heat. There are also three tent platforms built into the hillside and tents available for use.

Last year a Dodgeville Boy Scout, Gus Quade and his helpers, did his Eagle Scout project at Friendship Center. "He redid the fire circle with beautiful benches and railings along a steep part of the trail," Gretchen said. "That was a really nice thing. When the people from the Center for Independence came, they were able to use the fire pit for the first time."

center would then be accessible to busses and more people.

Many of the folks who have worked with Friendship Center from the beginning years have, or will have to decrease their involvement as they get older. Three years ago, Dave passed the responsibility of camp director to Tennesen, a retired teacher living near Dodgeville. Gretchen has passed on her duties as camp cook, but both continue to do all they can to help with the Children's Camp.

"Over the years, we've had about



Volunteer, Louisa Hoessel, and campers show off the results of their bread baking.

Dave Pearson and a fellow educator, Mary Bunge, founded Friendship Center in 1970 as a non-profit organization. Dave was teaching at inner city schools in Milwaukee, and Bunge taught reading in New Berlin.

I experienced that kids in my sixth grade class had lost out on learning to read, and as a result they developed attitude problems," explained Dave, sitting by the fireplace in the solar-powered home he and Gretchen share across the road from Friendship Center. The Pearsons moved to their rural Dodgeville property in 1997. Dave had achieved a PhD in Reading Administration and was working as

plained.

Bunge was good friends with the late Isabel and Monroe Smith, founders of American Youth Hostelling and Youth Argosy, who owned property in North Carolina. When Youth Argosy ceased operations, the Smiths offered the 501 (c) funds to Bunge to start a reading camp in North Carolina.

There, Friendship Center offered adult retreats and reading camps for youth who were transported from Milwaukee. Dave and Gretchen volunteered at the three-week camps.

But the North Carolina location proved to be too great a distance from Wisconsin for volunteers so the land was sold, and in 1975



Dodgeville Eagle Scout, Gus Quade, and helpers work on the new benches and firepit at Friendship Center.

They spent a day ice-climbing at frozen Stephens Falls in Governor Dodge Park.

The two-story, 20x40-foot lodge provides a kitchen, dining room with great views, meeting area, restrooms, small bunkhouse room, an outdoor deck with tables, and a lower level recreation area that opens onto the hillside. One of the

Maintenance and improvement needs at the center are ongoing. The Pearsons are hoping to improve the wooden bridge they built years ago across Canyon Park Creek. A stronger bridge would allow gravel trucks to cross and improve the steep tracks that now lead up to the lodge, requiring 4-wheel drive much of the time. The

200 people helping here with one thing or another," Gretchen said.

"Our board of directors, our advisory committee, our Evans Quarry neighbors, and our generous supporters, all help Friendship Center continue providing a comfortable place for folks, especially young people, to get next to nature," Dave said.



Judy Kingsbury and Les Grosberg take the campers on a creek walk.



Campers pose in what they have named "The Friendship Tree," near the lodge.