

History moment #8: The birth of Wilderness Wind

It started with a phone call, a road trip to the North woods, an idea born of possibility, a surprise check in the mail. This year Wilderness Wind celebrates its 25th anniversary—a quarter century of offering retreat into the wilderness of the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota; thousands of people have encountered God in a new way through this unique Mennonite camp. From very early in its history, Wilderness Wind's story has been intertwined with that of Faith Mennonite.

There was a phone call to General Conference Mennonite church headquarters in Newton Kansas: the grandson of pioneer missionaries in Ely, the vanDykes, had a piece of property that they wanted to donate, or sell at a minimal cost, to Mennonites. It was an old church camp on 12 acres, and their desire was that it be used for something with a Christian intention. The request was forwarded to Paula Lehman, who was working for the General Conference in youth ministry, and sat on the Mennonite Camping Association board. Her husband Tim Lehman was campus minister at Bethel College. Together they had led trips to the boundary waters for Camp Friedenswald, where they had worked as program directors while studying at the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart Indiana.

So Paula and Tim said to each other, let's take a look. In the winter of 1984, they drove the 14 hours from Newton up to Ely to take a look. They parked their car on the side of Highway 169, strapped on snowshoes, and set out to see the property. Their first impression was of lungs filled with the crisp pure Minnesota winter air, and then the heady smell of pine. As they snowshoed around the buildings, however, their initial euphoria faded. Among a cluster of a half dozen old resort buildings, each in more discouragingly bad disrepair than the next—Paula remembers thinking “the nicest building is the outhouse, with its fake stained glass window.” And then the disappointment that there was no water—just a bunch of very old ramshackle buildings set into a piece of lovely woods just off the highway.

On the long drive back to Newton, Paula and Tim talked it over. They discussed its potential; they both had a keen interest in the spirituality of creation and care of

the earth; they had been leading wilderness trips for a number of years, first backpacking to the Appalachians and the pictured rocks of Lake Superior. As program directors at Michigan's Camp Friedenswald in 1978, they had first been introduced to the boundary waters by neighbors who showed them—beavers, eagles, moose. And above all, the remoteness of the wilderness; they found its stillness and beauty very compelling. They had subsequently led trips for Camp Friedenswald into the BWCA wilderness.

As they talked, they developed the vision for what this little camp could become. A place to introduce people to the wilderness. To experience God's creation in a pure way, stripped of the distractions of our electronic world. To teach environmental education and sustainability interwoven with Christian spirituality. To lead trips which demonstrated cooperation, and to inspire learning how little one really needs. As they discussed it, they thought maybe the lack of a lake could be a good thing, providing less distraction from the main task of a base camp outfitting for wilderness trips. They imagined this camp serving to lead trips for all the other Mennonite camps. None of them had any interest in acquiring the property; it was too remote and didn't fit their programming needs. And so Tim and Paula continued dreaming about funding and organizing it themselves.

The owners wanted \$5000 for the property, a sum that Tim and Paula could ill afford at this point in their lives. As they continued to talk it over that week, a letter arrived from Tim's mother. She had recently had a health scare and was reevaluating her personal finances, deciding to distribute some funds to her children. Enclosed in the envelope was a check—for \$5000. This felt like a concrete sign to proceed with their dream, a very literal answer to prayers. Seed money for the vision. And so they purchased the land. For the next 5 years they commuted up for summers, working out of their home in Newton. They formed a board, consisting primarily of representatives of other Mennonite camps, and incorporated in 1986 as Wilderness Wind. The name reflected both of the camps emphases: the experience of the wilderness as the "wind" or breath of God.

Faith Mennonite became involved from early on. In the spring of 1985, Tim and daughter Kristin stopped in Minneapolis on their way to Ely. Over an informal

pizza supper, he shared his vision for the camp to a group from Faith. Later that summer, a dozen people from Faith drove up to Wilderness wind for a work weekend. Their biggest task was replacing the leaking roof of the main building—now the food prep building.

In 1991, after the resignation of Myron Schrag, Faith Mennonite invited Tim and Paula as our new pastors. This solidified our strong connection with Wilderness wind. Since then, many of our members have served on the board—among them Mike Schrock, Bob Mack, Teresa Wasick, and myself. Mike Schrock for many years led youth canoe trips for Faith Mennonite boys. Melissa Falb currently serves on the board and recently completed the annual paddle-a-thon for fundraising. Many of our group use Wilderness Wind to make regular trips into the BWCA or to stay at the Lakeside cabins.

Wilderness wind has evolved over these 25 years. Although initially envisioned as serving other camps, that soon was understood as presenting a conflict of interest and so the camp became independent. A staff house was built. In 1996, they purchased an additional property a few miles away on Armstrong Lake. This land had additional cabins, but most importantly—lake access. The cabins can now be rented out, by persons wanting a less remote experience of the boundary waters. The lake access is useful for swim tests, water safety instruction, and canoeing instruction. A yurt was recently constructed at the lakefront which proves useful for family reunions and other larger gatherings.

The first summer of operation, a Goshen college student named Kathy Landis went on one of the canoe trips. The following summer she returned as a staff person and trip guide. In one function or another, Kathy has been a part of Wilderness Wind ever since. She has been the director for over 15 years. Over its span, Wilderness wind staff have led an average of 25 trips a year, involving thousands of youth and adults. For a number of years, this has included trips of campers with disabilities. Recently, WW has forged a close association with “Big Mountain”, which brings underprivileged and problem children from Chicago to experience the challenge of wilderness.

Wilderness wind: 25 years, offering rest, relaxation, challenge, a chance to meet God in a place apart.

“Apprehend God in all things for God is in all things”—Meister Eckhart

“You are not made for the Sabbath; The Sabbath is made for you”—Mark 2:27

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