



Mike Jennings: A 30-YEAR LEGACY

April 13, 2024

HIRING MIKE JENNINGS

By *Dave Bretscher*

Almost everyone who has entered Camp's Gates would agree that it is a special place. Whether you stay an afternoon or for years, Camp becomes a part of you. Mike Jennings understands this. We have watched Mike go out of his way to make everyone he crosses paths with feel like they matter. From summer staff to volunteer groups to casual visitors, Mike could probably tell you the names of everyone along with something positive about each individual.

Mike is one of those rare people who would never say, "I don't think I can do that." If something needed to happen and he was not familiar with it he would figure out a solution, or find someone who could volunteer their

time and expertise. Regardless of how he did it, Mike never gave up, solved countless problems, and kept Camp running.



When it was time for Michelle and me to move on from Camp, I was asked if I could recommend a suitable replacement.

The Camp Ranger position needs someone who honestly cares enough to do what is in Camp's best interests. The Camp Ranger needs to set an example for staff and volunteers, as well as be able to solve a never-ending list of technical difficulties. Without the right person in place, Camp would surely suffer.

I could think of no better person than Mike Jennings. His talent and tenacity were perfect for the job, but more importantly, his integrity was second to none. I knew that Mike would take good care of Camp for all of the right reasons. What a relief I felt when he accepted the job!

All of us who care about Camp are very fortunate to have something so meaningful in our lives. Mike Jennings knows this. Mike took his responsibilities to heart. In doing so, he has touched countless lives and has earned a very meaningful retirement.

Heepwah Mike!

"I met Mike in 1997. I thought he was intimidating, but in a way that I admired him. He was no-nonsense, hard-working, and reliable. Mike was the guy who got things done. I wanted to emulate that, and I learned a lot from him. Mike is a gentle guy; loving, hardworking, a family man. One weekend during the summer, I stayed at Camp when everyone left on Saturday. I hung out with Mike's family, and we made dinner and played with Lacy's pets. It was nice getting to know his sweet family. It's hard to imagine how Camp could run without Mike. He knows everything and the best ways to get the job done. He is a very important part of the Camp Family, and always will be. We're all better for knowing Mike Jennings."

Elizabeth "Liz" (Nimnicht) Abaray

Former Camper, Staff, Volunteer, Donor



MIKE, OUR CAMP DAD *By Sara (Bell) Clifford*

He watched us grow. He taught us life skills. He laughed and poked fun and gossiped with us. He kept us safe.

Mike has functioned as “Camp Dad” to hundreds of kids beyond the one he legally claims. Though many of us are now parents ourselves, the fact that Mike cared enough to teach, to encourage, and to keep connected to us long past our teen years is still making an impact.

“The unseen legacy is ... the amount of people’s lives Mike has touched,” said Scott Wobbe, a friend, board member, and maintenance volunteer.

Most of us met Mike when there was a problem – one of our own making and/or one we didn’t know how to fix. “When I was a teenager, I liked to follow Mike around and learn things from him whenever I could,” said Elizabeth “Liz” (Nimmicht) Abaray, a summer staff alumna and now volunteer. “I remember trying to find a leak in a water line in the summer of 1999. We kept digging around where we thought it was, but had to be careful not to hit the pipe. I was 18 years old and had never done this before, but Mike told me just how to clamp it. It took a long time to find that leak, but it felt so good to take care of the problem.”

“I don’t think enough of a big deal is made out of what Mike has done for generations of women,” said Mandy (Byron) Margraff, a 1990s - 2000s summer staff alumna who then began volunteering in maintenance as an adult. “I remember being intimidated by maintenance when I was young, until once he looked me dead in the eyes and said, ‘If these dumbasses can do it, you certainly can.’ That stuck with me. As a young woman with little mechanical knowledge, it was very impactful, because he’s right. Most of those skills come simply from having the audacity or confidence to believe you CAN do them.”

When we had car trouble, Mike would help, even if it wasn’t actually part of his job. “I can remember several times, one that involves my daughter while she was on staff, where he helped individuals with their cars that would not start, keys locked in the car or a flat tire,” said Cindy Wobbe. Mike even taught Amber Garvey how to drive a stick shift.



*Mike and some volunteer Disney princesses:
Jen (Stout) Schirding, Sarah (Cox) Laury, Mandy (Byron)
Margraff and Betsy (Smith) Stierwalt.*

“He took me out on the Camp Road in the one-ton, and patiently let me grind the gears as I worked through it,” she said. “I had wanted to learn but was intimidated. Mike coached me through it, and I was so proud to learn, and felt so cool driving the Camp trucks. “I do recall when I backed the Camp van side mirror into a tree and shattered the mirror,” she added. “I was nervous to report this, but he was benevolent! I’m certain that Mike grew a thick skin for dealing with all of our youthful chaos!”

Mike, like all full-time staff, also took turns patrolling Camp after curfew, protecting us from ourselves as well as from ‘locals.’ “I think for every story of Mike scaring the life out of someone, as just the burning end of a cigarette about to bust you on Rat Patrol, there’s a story of him being so sweet and protective,” said Betsy (Smith) Stierwalt.

“‘Sweet’ and ‘protective’ was my experience. I became the Jennings family’s neighbor when I was 21 and right out of college. Cedars was my first home and the first time I had lived alone. I didn’t go over to their side of the duplex much because frankly, I was intimidated by Mike, but I was so comforted in knowing they were there in the same building with me. When my then-boyfriend, Derek, started coming around and we

started dating, he was convinced that Mike hated him. But Mike was just sizing him up – being wary, like a good dad would. It wasn’t until last year – 20 years into our marriage – that Derek learned he’d passed that test.

Mike was always watching, whether we realized it or not. Kate Perek realized just how much over her last few years of volunteering. “Mike has recalled very specific things from when I was on staff. Like, tiny stories I could barely remember,” she said. Though we might have doubted we were that memorable or important, we shouldn’t have. He was looking out for all the kids at Camp.

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Mike, Our Camp Dad, continued from page 2

He was quick to step up if he was needed to care for one of those 'kids.' When Jamie (Dover) Gayer slipped and fell on her way to Central one day while working seasonal, "it was very obvious that I had a very broken wrist," she said. "Mike was my knight in shining armor who took me on in to the hospital and waited for me while my wrist was getting set in a cast. His biggest concern was that I wouldn't get sick in his new truck on our way to the ER! He did take me by Dairy Queen on the way back to Camp, and Becky took very good care of me until my parents could come down and pick up me and my car for further treatment."

I experienced that care, too. One night when I was living in the Cedars apartment, I was working on a craft project and using a steak knife in a way I definitely should not have. It slipped and I sliced my index finger super deep. I ran next door to Mike in a panic, because I knew he was a WFR (wilderness first responder), and he would know what to do. He and Becky bandaged me up and convinced me that I was not going to lose a finger. Mike also gave First Aid to my dog when he crashed through a window.

Because of his multitude of skills and the way he treats other people, "He's someone I look up to and never wanted to disappoint," said Catherine Limkeman, Camp's current Equestrian Director. "Something else that stands out is how he lights up when my girls are around. He is always ready to give them a popsicle or leave some sand behind on a project for them to play in," she said. "His care for my family has been greatly impactful."

Margraff considers Mike to be 'the ultimate girl dad.' "He never mistook our silliness for stupidity. He knew how to utilize whatever skills we had and could quickly teach us the rest," she said. "I always appreciated that he still saw us as hardworking and valuable, even when we were having more fun than anyone had a right to do while doing gross projects."

"Mike helped me know that I could do anything I put my mind to," Abaray said. "He helped me to find the joy in a job well done and to savor that feeling of accomplishment. There's an art to repairs and restoration; even fixing a broken toilet has value. I still enjoy these things over 20 years later."

Mike's leaving Camp feels a bit like losing a parent. For 30 years, we've known we can stop by Central whenever we're 'home' to see a person who will greet us with a hug, ask how we're doing, and urge us not to be strangers.

"As a 'Camp kid,' coming down with my family when I was very young, and then coming as a camper, and working on staff, Mike has been there throughout," Garvey said. "Mike is a mainstay in my mind at Camp. He's been so vital to Camp and keeping it running. He has impacted so many people. Mike has given his all to Camp and embodies the Camp Spirit."

"It's hard to imagine how Camp could run without Mike," Abaray said. "He knows everything and the best ways to get the job done. He's a very important part of the Camp Family and always will be."

However, he also has an actual family, and it's time for them to get more of him. We'll just miss him, a lot. "I just told my husband that this party will be like a huge family reunion," said his daughter, Lacy (Jennings) Guard. "Camp people will always be a part of our family."



Mike ("Sweaty") poses with Snow White and some of the Seven Dwarves: Kate Perek, Sara (Cox) Laury, Mandy (Byron) Margraff, Betsy (Smith) Stierwalt, and Megan (Bell) Jones.

Pictures courtesy of Mandy (Byron) Margraff



A TRIBUTE TO MIKE JENNINGS

From Korte Luitjohan Contractors, Inc.

By Tony Vrooman

Camp Ondessonk, nestled in the heart of nature's embrace, has been a sanctuary for countless individuals seeking adventure, growth, and community. At the heart of this haven stood Mike Jennings, the Camp Ranger whose unwavering dedication and tireless efforts have shaped Camp's legacy for the past three decades. As Mike prepares to bid farewell to Camp Ondessonk and embark on a new chapter in his life, his departure leaves behind a void that will be deeply felt by all who have known him.

Reflecting on his memories of working alongside Mike, Gregg Korte, President of Korte & Luitjohan Contractors, Inc., shared heartfelt sentiments that capture the essence of Mike's impact on Camp Ondessonk. "I just remember meeting him as an employee and as part of Dad's family (Pete Korte family), and Mike being Camp's go-to guy," Korte fondly recalls. From their first encounter, it was evident that Mike's presence was synonymous with the spirit of Camp Ondessonk, embodying its values of community, service, and stewardship.



Korte's first impression of Mike echoed the sentiments of many who have crossed paths with him over the years. "Mike knew where everything was and how stuff worked and why," Korte remarked, highlighting Mike's profound knowledge and expertise in Camp operations. Mike's dedication to his role as Camp Ranger went beyond mere job responsibilities; it was a testament to his unwavering commitment to ensuring Camp's success and the well-being of its inhabitants.

Korte described Mike's work ethic: "He's all about helping, and he goes over and above. He does a lot of volunteer time in the middle of his job for Camp." Mike's selflessness and willingness to go the extra mile did not go unnoticed, as he dedicated countless hours to the betterment of Camp Ondessonk.

As Mike's retirement draws near, thoughts inevitably turn to his enduring legacy at Camp Ondessonk. Korte reflected, "He leaves behind a campground that operates well; the plant, the mechanics of it is as good as a nonprofit camp could possibly be. Whoever takes his place has really large shoes to fill." Indeed, Mike's contributions have left an indelible mark on the Camp's infrastructure and operations, setting a standard of excellence that will endure for years to come.

Amidst the gratitude and fond memories, a palpable sense of loss lingers at the thought of Mike no longer being a fixture at Camp Ondessonk. Korte shared his sentiments, expressing, "Oh boy - just his genuine personality, his friendliness, his teamwork personality. It won't be the same. I don't know how they will find someone like Mike." Mike's presence has been integral to Camp's physical upkeep and its vibrant sense of community and camaraderie."

Gregg made a point to say, "Dad worked with Mike for many years. To say that he was fond of Mike and loved dealing with him is an understatement. It's too bad Dad isn't here to give us some words and comments about Mike. Dad thought the world of Mike."

In closing, Korte extended a heartfelt message to Mike, expressing his appreciation for their shared experiences and friendship. "It's been great working with you on the various projects. Just a pleasure - and from my end, I'm going to certainly miss your presence and your contribution, and your friendship." These sentiments echo the sentiments of many whose lives have been touched by Mike's warmth, dedication, and unwavering spirit of service."

As Mike Jennings prepares to embark on the next chapter of his journey, the legacy he leaves behind at Camp Ondessonk will be a testament to his enduring impact and unwavering commitment to excellence. Though his presence will be deeply missed, his spirit will continue to inspire generations of campers and staff for years to come.

BECKY REMEMBERS THE PAST 30 YEARS

By Amber Garvey

I spent some time with Becky Jennings, asking questions to learn about their family's time at Camp Ondessonk.

What is your memory about Mike first hearing about the job at Camp and his interest in it?

"He was a laid-off miner at the time Mike heard about the job. We lived within five miles of Camp, and Mike thought that would be a cool place to work - close to home, and in his wheelhouse. I do remember when he interviewed, he wanted the job, and he liked that it was something outside. He liked the fact that there was a bear (Tommy) and part of the job would be to take care of the bear. He loved Tommy, but when Camp got Yonah, he and Yonah had a real connection. I do remember that with his experience in logging and driving big equipment, working at a truss company, and his skills of being able to fix anything around the house, Camp would be a great fit for him. He liked the idea of being able to do so much, and that Dave (Bretscher) was easy-going. Dave was such a nice, pleasant person who he could get along with."



What was it like to move to Camp?

"At first Mike was hired on as Assistant Ranger. Then we moved to Camp when he was hired on as Ranger. That was really cool, we enjoyed it. It was different because people were around all the time. We were in our late 20s - seems so odd to say that. Mike started when he was 29. We raised Lacy there. A lot of the younger staff and seasonal staff would come to the house, and I would cook. If it stormed or snowed, Mike could clear the road quickly, get to urgent matters, things people don't necessarily see on the backside. It was convenient living onsite."

What was it like for you to raise Lacy at Camp?

"Raising Lacy at Camp was very much a blessing. As an only child, we were able to give Lacy a life where she could see and meet so many people and experience so many things. She had an experience with nature, and she still loves and respects it. She learned to see people for who they are. She's my little 'camp hippy.' She could do Summer Camp activities, explore, and do

various things. She could jump in with a unit, help out at the Trading Post, and then come home at night. She could socialize and experience a lot of living at Camp."

Talk about Mike adjusting to the job and getting a sense of Camp's scale?

"Mike enjoyed being outdoors - one thing he really enjoyed was the volunteer program, cultivating it, and seeing it grow. When Mike started, he was very much an introvert. Having to do his job, he had to become more of an extrovert, and he did. I think he's great at it. He really liked being able to do his job and not be super micromanaged. He liked that each day would be different and he would not be stuck in an office."

What was your observation about Mike's work?

"Mike's mentality in life is seeing something - even in marriage - and he will break it down. He's my fixer. He will compartmentalize and problem solve, and know it can only get better. It's like a building block, take each piece, build, go up."

What was Mike like at home? How would he unwind?

"Mike would enjoy coming home, finding out how homeschooling went, spending time with Lacy and me. He would eat, talk with us, watch some shows, and then go to bed. By that time, it was usually late. In the early days he put in SO many hours. We didn't see him as often, even though we lived onsite. So, we'd go where he was. I felt it was important for Lacy to see him. During our time off for vacation, we'd go camping; that's when we'd spend our time together. That was our solid family time.

Sometimes Mike would decompress after a hard stressful day's work by walking in the woods, just to think and regroup. He's always done that at Camp and still likes to get out and be in the woods to think. That is his happy place, finding mushrooms and different plants. He can tell you the tree just by the bark...a true nature man."

What did Mike feel was important to him about the job?

"When he first applied, Lacy needed surgery, and he needed a job with insurance. Being laid off and the mine closing, there were no benefits. Camp had benefits. What kept him going was that he really liked his job. 'I like helping the little kids; it's for the little kids. Because it makes a difference, it will all help the kids in the end,' he would say. It started out as a job, but it became more."

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He would tell me, 'Oh my gosh Becky, one little girl was walking by, and there wasn't a spot without a bug bite, but she just kept on going!' Or, 'one girl was crying every day but she stayed all week. I'd ask the counselor if she was ok, and they said she didn't want to go home.' Mike would always check on the kids or the counselors. He noticed little things – that is what makes him such a caring person. That is why he knows that Camp is for the children."

How did you handle the quiet during winter and then the hectic pace of Summer Camp?

"Fall and winter were nice and peaceful to catch up on your life. You can breathe and just enjoy the quiet of Camp, and the winters are so beautiful. Volunteers would come in and it would switch, and we'd slow down a bit to take a breath. Mike was always getting ready for something, but it was always nice to have that break and focus on off-season projects. I always liked the summer being so chaotic and busy, but I also loved the off season."

Mike has inspired so many people over the years - why do you think he's able to influence, and mentor folks?

"Mike just has a very patient and kind heart. He is very charismatic; he will sit and listen and take things in. He doesn't talk a lot sometimes, but he's listening. Even raising Lacy, he had such a way of talking with her. He would come home with stories - he would talk so highly about the staff. Mike has a dry sense of humor. Not everyone gets him, but he's funny once you're around him. His values, integrity, and work ethic are important to him. He truly values the staff and wants to see them succeed and wants them to have a great work ethic as well."



What are you proud of about Mike?

"I am so proud of him for all his accomplishments. He has designed so many of the buildings at Camp. I just love how much he loved Yonah. We would go into the cage to clean and he would say, 'Becky you hold the Boston baked beans or the soda.' I would feed him, and Mike would clean the cage. There are just so many things that I'm proud of him for. So many things he has done over 30 years that I wish I could tell you all about. I mean this whole heartedly, he has made so many real friends. Camp friends are just different - it's a whole different vibe. You just can't beat it."

What do you think Mike's legacy will be at Camp?

"I hope that people remember how hard he worked; that he has such a loving spirit; a great work ethic, and that he really built a great Volunteer Program."

What will it be like for you to adjust to him not being at Camp?

"He is looking so forward to retirement; he is so excited. We have 20 acres out here; he wants to work on the farm. I keep telling him I have a big, long 'honey-do' list that will keep him busy. My thought is that he will get bored - it will be different not working on 1,000 acres. But I can't wait to have him to myself for the next 50 or 60 years!"

What has the Camp Community meant to you & your family?

"The Camp Community is a true community. I didn't go to Camp there, so I used to think: that's for the people who went there. But the people who became our friends, we stay in contact with. No matter which direction we travel, we have a Camp person reach out, invite us out. It's a true friendship & bond. I think it's awesome, I think it's a lifelong bond. Someone always knows Camp. I'm so thankful to God for all of that."



MEMORIES FROM THE STAFF



"I became the Assistant Ranger at Camp Ondessonk in May of 2021. My interview with Mike Jennings was conducted sitting side-by-side in a truck as Mike showed me around Camp.

There have been dozens of projects I have enjoyed working on with Mike, the most memorable

being the ongoing planning and construction of the new Pete Korte Lodge. It has been a great opportunity to work alongside Mike and learn several new skills.

One memorable experience with Mike was my very first Friends Weekend. On the Sunday of the dance, it had been raining hard and Mike, Kav, and I were filling and placing sandbags and digging drainages in an attempt to slow the flooding in the Original Dining Hall so that the band and the show could go on! The other memory that vividly stands out is the first time Mike showed me how to operate the hay baler. I had never run a baler before, but he was very understanding and helpful and had me laughing the whole time. I was excited to start baling. Little did I know that day, we would spend the rest of the summer digging hay out of the baler in the sweltering heat!

Mike's legacy at Camp CANNOT be overstated. He has such an intimate knowledge and profound care for every aspect of Camp, its buildings and systems, as well as its people. If anyone would ever like to see and experience Mike's ongoing legacy at Camp, all they need to do is simply come to Camp and look around or talk to anyone who ever has. Across our 983 acres, one would be hard-pressed to find a single square foot that has not been shaped, perfected, or diligently cared for by Mike. In my time, I have not met a person who possesses a knowledge of Camp, its land, buildings, nuances, and people like Mike, and I don't suspect I ever will."

Scott Martin, Assistant Ranger



"I've not been able to put into words what I believe Mike Jennings has meant to Camp....or to me. There are too many emotional triggers to contend with. Frankly, I don't believe his substantial contribution and exceptional value have yet been recognized. Maybe the extent of the loss will finally be realized after he's gone. He has been a significant personal support for me. I've always

felt that he 'has my six.' What will I miss most about Mike? Just Mike!!!

Lucia (Juenger) Hodges, Volunteer Coordinator

"Mike seemed like a no-nonsense kind of guy and a bit intimidating, except he had Becky in the side-by-side with him and their little dog in her lap, so I knew he wasn't all that scary. Mike's work ethic is easy, 'work 'til you die - or 4:30.' I remember driving around in the truck coming up with Round-Up projects and talking about life. He's a good man, and has a lot of wisdom. He's someone I look up to and never want to disappoint. I'll never forget what you've done for me and my girls, Mike. I'm gonna miss you and our drives around Camp."

Catherine Limkeman, Equestrian Director



"During a tumultuous summer evening at Camp Ondessonk, chaos struck when a fierce storm ravaged the Camp, leaving the road impassable due to fallen trees. As the Director of Communications, I found myself stranded amidst the debris, feeling like a character in "The Wizard of Oz" as debris flew around in a chaotic dance. Just

when all hope seemed lost, Mike Jennings, the Camp Ranger, emerged as a beacon of hope. With unwavering determination and his trusty backhoe, he took on the Herculean task of clearing the road single-handedly. Mike's swift and heroic actions not only reopened the path but also restored a sense of safety and normalcy to Camp, proving once again the invaluable role of dedicated individuals in times of crisis."

Tony Vrooman, Senior Director of Communications

"One of my favorite memories with Mike is the Labor Day firewood challenge at Raganeau, but that's all I can say about that.

Mike always makes sure all the guests, volunteers and coworkers are well taken care of, and they, in turn, would do anything for him. He is well respected, and it is well deserved. We have a lot in common, including our love for family - especially the grandkids! I'm happy (and jealous) he will have more time to spend with them. Cheers to you, Mike!"



Sue Clancy, Data Coordinator



“I met Mike when he was a young Assistant Ranger working under Ranger Dave Bretscher during my first summer as an Ondessonk counselor. As he joined the Camp year-round staff, Mike was immediately liked by all; his youthful energy and

committed work ethic stood out to us, and he immediately became a role model to emulate. I returned to work professionally at Camp Ondessonk nearly a decade later. By then, Mike was the Camp Ranger, with an Assistant Ranger of his own. As I found myself working on projects he supervised, I learned not only life-long technical skills but also important lessons in organization, planning, and the art of building stakeholders - inspiring others to contribute wholly and fully to a cause they believed in. My work ethic was undoubtedly shaped by striving to meet Mike’s standards and expectations. My ability to improvise and to stretch resources was influenced by him and my commitment to Camp was strengthened working alongside him for the next 10 years.

Now, three decades on, I’ve returned to working professionally at Camp Ondessonk and bringing with me a more seasoned eye for nuance. As I look around, I see Mike’s influence everywhere. I see what seemed like endless backlogs of deferred maintenance skillfully addressed and multiple aspects of Ondessonk’s grounds more whole and polished. I see projects that I would never have imagined now in place and the organization poised for success for decades to come. I am now working with the children - and even grandchildren - of the Camp supporters that Mike Jennings had a direct role in stewarding for the organization, all of whom share an element of his dedication and commitment to the betterment of this place. It has been rewarding to witness each chapter of Mike Jennings’ Camp Ondessonk career, and it is a privilege to have been able to call him a colleague, a mentor, and a friend.”

Evan Coulson, Adventure & Group Services Director

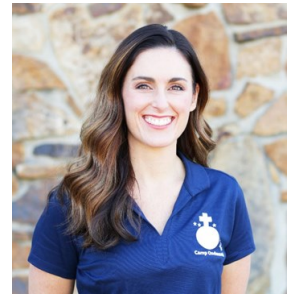


“I first met Mike when I was brought around and introduced to the staff at Camp. He asked me who I was related to and was told that he knew my family and went to high school with my mom. Mike likes to get things done and checked off his ever-growing list! He is someone everyone knows or likes to work with. He is the

reason so many of the volunteers love to come to Camp. He puts time in with the volunteers and respects those who have come and helped. I will miss Mike in general, because there is not really just one thing that sticks out, because there is so much.”

Lisa Bloodworth, Finance Director

“Mike has been a blessing to Camp Ondessonk! He has a way of making everyone feel like they’ve been long-time friends, and his work ethic and dedication drives others to do their best. His impact and influence will be remembered by everyone who crossed paths with him during the last 30 years.”



Whitney Strang, Director of Development



A GREAT WAY TO HONOR MIKE JENNINGS

Some have asked how they can remember Mike Jennings’ years of dedication to Camp Ondessonk. We have been asked to let those who wish to recognize Mike’s legacy to Camp, to please do so by sending a gift in his honor to his favorite charity: The Assistance Fund (TAF) at <https://tafcares.org/about-us/>. This foundation provides life-saving financial assistance to people with rare diseases and is one of the few resources available to people with diseases such as hypophosphatemia, a condition that hits close to home for the Jennings family. Without TAF, several family members would not have access to the one and only exorbitantly expensive medication they rely on to treat their condition. Aside from assisting people with hypophosphatemia, TAF has resources available for approximately 80 other rare diseases. Mike can’t stand to see children suffer, and he has spent many nights in hospitals watching several of his own family members do just that. If his retirement celebration can contribute in any way to alleviating part of another family’s healthcare stresses, he would be honored. Your gift to TAF is a wonderful way to honor Mike’s profound contributions, leadership, and friendship.



CAMP'S GOOD FORTUNE

By Gene Canavan

When Mike Jennings came to Camp, he seemed to already possess what, to my mind, was a knowledge of Camp's most fundamental formula: welcome all - respect all. To Camp's good fortune, Mike welcomed and respected those he worked with and served throughout his career.



My favorite *Mike* story is the day Wade Flake and I went up to Durbin's Barn in Wade's truck. There we ran across Mike pondering a flat tire on the backhoe. Nice fellas that we were, we offered him a ride down to Central Supply.

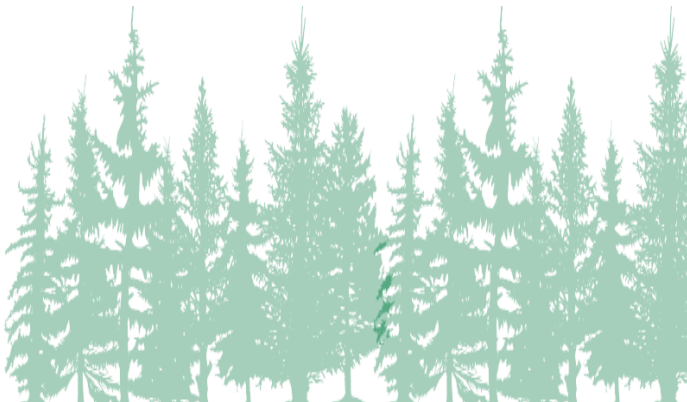
Slowly bumping down the hill and around Lake Echon, we talked about past flat tires and other miseries, until just past

Lalamont Unit (we were on the high road) Mike yelled 'STOP!' He popped out of Wade's truck and headed straight into the woods. We followed him, of course. About 15 yards up to the base of a large tree. Girdling the bottom of that tree was the biggest *Chicken of the Woods* fungus that Wade or I had ever encountered. Mike told us, "You're in luck, this will be your supper tonight." In less than three minutes, Mike found three or four other fungi (some edible, some not) and rattled off a half dozen other interesting things about the woods we did not know.

Well, we got back into the truck and returned Mike to his work. Wade and I headed to Brebeuf where we were camping, and it was almost supper time. I don't remember what we meant to cook at our campfire that night, but what we ended up eating was a delicious *Chicken of the Woods* cooked in a frying pan according to Mike's recipe. We never ate so good.

Mike's a good guy to run into in the woods, or any other place for that matter.

Thanks for the memories, Mike!



DESCRIBE RANGER MIKE...

"Mike is 'The Buck stops here' kind of guy. He doesn't waste words or materials." *Norb Garvey*

"Small grizzly bear." *Jamie (Dover) Gayer*

"Very outgoing; always talked to everyone. Good work ethic for sure." *Eric Brennan*

"Mike will do anything for you, and gives Camp his all, and does a great job of keeping Camp in good working order. When something is going on, Mike is there, and still there when you're at lunch, when you're finished at the end of the day, he's part of the crew; he hangs out with you." *Gregg Korte*

"All around 'Good Ol' Boy.'" *Lisa Bloodworth*

"If he gives you his word, trust him." *Pati Egan*

"Enthusied and dedicated person to Camp O. Such a nice guy who loves Camp and his family very much."
The volunteers of Knights of Columbus Council 1581

"Mike is one of those rare people who would never say, 'I don't think I can do that.' If something needed to happen and he was not familiar with it, he would figure out a solution or find someone who could volunteer their time and expertise." *Dave Bretscher*

"Quiet, reserved, and polite. Curious to know what/who you are. Determined to get the job done." *Jim Shively*

"A smart, caring, thoughtful and dedicated person. A good guy. Hard worker that doesn't let up." *Tip Belz*

"He's just a hell of a good guy; a good, friendly guy."
Jim Richter and the Clinton County Crew

"Mike's a gentle guy, a loving, hardworking, family man."
Elizabeth "Liz" (Nimnicht) Abaray

"Hands-on, helpful leader." *Steve Rheinecker*

"He's the 'go-to' guy when you need help with any project. He will always make time to lend a hand for whatever you are working on." *Judy Blase Woodruff*

"Mike knows all the dirt." *Betsy (Smith) Stierwalt*

"He is a great guy with a huge amount of patience. He is always willing to give an individual the opportunity to learn something new." *Cindy Wobbe*

"Mike is someone who cares deeply and works hard. He comes across rough and crusty, but he's all heart."
Catherine Limkeman

"Mike is the guy with the slicked-backed hair and white beard wearing his only blue and gray sweatshirt. Don't let his grumpy-old-man demeanor scare you. He is a teddy bear inside who would give you that blue/gray sweatshirt off of his back." *Scott Wobbe*

THREE DECADES STRONG *By Dan King, Executive Director*

Mike Jennings began working for Camp Ondessonk in 1994, which was also my last year as a summer camp counselor. Dave Bretscher introduced us as he and Mike drove through the main area in the tall, white, GMC 4X4 truck I still associate with Dave. Though it was only a brief introduction shared among three guys who tend to be quiet at first, Mike remembered my name when, a few years later, I began returning to Camp once or twice a year for volunteer weekends. By then, Dave was gone, and Mike had thoroughly earned the admiration and respect of his coworkers and the entire Camp Community, which is no surprise, as he made even occasional visitors like me feel welcomed and appreciated.

When I worked at other camps, Mike and Dave were the gold-standard Camp Rangers to whom I compared every other Ranger. I developed a case of Ranger envy. While the maintenance and construction part of the job is important, the best Camp Rangers do much more than build and fix things. Great Camp Rangers like Mike Jennings are pillars in their respective camp communities. They are ambassadors, leaders, confidants, and friends to all.

In early March of 2006, I found myself riding around Lake Echon with Mike in the 1999 Ford 4X4 work truck he used for so long. Though he prefers GM vehicles, I still associate that generation of F-150s with Mike Jennings, especially when I see a white one. I was visiting Camp for a job interview, and I got to spend time with Mike as a part of the process. During our conversation, soft-spoken Mike asked, "How do you feel about working with volunteers?" I told him that volunteers are essential to Camp Ondessonk's success, that the organization is very fortunate to have them, and that they should be treated well. He agreed. That was Mike Jennings' most consequential question for me. He wasn't concerned with my leadership style or my experience as a camp director. He wanted to ensure I would support him in his endless efforts to value Camp's volunteers.



For 30 years, Mike Jennings has personally thanked every volunteer he has encountered. When he shows gratitude to a gathering of people, he often says, "We couldn't do it without you," when we all know the truth about these last 30 years - that his leadership has been indispensable to Camp's growth and progress.

The best Summer Camp counselors are frequently credited with having a profound, life-long impact on their campers. This sentiment is common among many who have experienced the joy of being a Camp Ondessonk camper. Great counselors listen well. They are good-humored and conscientious. Great counselors care what your name is. They might not remember it every time, but they care enough to try. They also plan adequately, then they adjust when it rains. Though he's never worked a day as an official Summer Camp counselor, Mike Jennings is, perhaps, the best counselor Camp Ondessonk has ever had. It was an honor to be one of his volunteers, and a greater honor to be his coworker.

Though Mike will be sorely missed by all, his legacy will remain strong for many, many decades to come. He deserves the best in retirement, for he has given Camp Ondessonk his best.

"Years ago, maybe '95/'97, we put a six-inch PVC water main in up by Ozark, down the two miles of main road to Camp. That's the first time that I really dealt with Mike. We were there for a weekend and spent Friday getting ready, Saturday, and then Sunday, the day went so long that we stayed overnight. I didn't lead up the project; my dad (Pete Korte) did. That was the first time I remember working with Mike. It was the first time I knew that Mike knew where everything was and how it all worked. It was a fun day, but it was rough on the equipment -all the rock we went through to get it in!" *Gregg Korte*

"Sitting out at Kane Lake on Labor Day weekends with the Jennings - a great campfire and great company." *Pati Egan*

"Mike let me feed Yonah the Bear, and that's a memory I'll treasure forever." *Jamie (Dover) Gayer*

"Building the deck on the Fournie Lodge, I assembled the stairs with Mike. He taught me a lot, and it honestly just was a rewarding experience." *Catherine Limkeman*

"The day we celebrated John Blue's life at the Creal Springs VFW. I think it was one of the first times I saw Mike all dressed up and a completely different side of Mike. We ate, drank, sang, danced, and told JB stories. I saw how much Mike's friends really mean to him that evening." *Scott Wobbe*

REFLECTING ON THE LEGACY OF MIKE JENNINGS

A Tribute from Norb Garvey

By Tony Vrooman

Camp Ondessonk holds a special place in the hearts of many, including Norb Garvey, a former employee turned volunteer and donor. As the news of Mike Jennings, Camp Ranger extraordinaire, retiring after three decades of dedicated service spread through the Camp community, Garvey took a moment to reflect on the impact Jennings had made.

Garvey, now the President at HFTW, LLC, residing in Nashville, Indiana, vividly recalls his first encounter with Mike Jennings. "Thirty years ago, I've always enjoyed meeting and working with Camp Ondessonk Rangers, I knew right off that Mike was the real deal. I remember feeling very comfortable with Mike in charge," Garvey reminisces, indicating his immediate trust and confidence in Jennings.

When asked about his first impression of Jennings, Garvey doesn't hesitate. "Mike, from his first day, has always displayed calm leadership," he remarks. It's a testament to Jennings' character and demeanor, setting the tone for his tenure at Camp Ondessonk.

Discussing Jennings' work ethic, Garvey's admiration shines through. "I would say that Mike's ethics speak for themselves," he comments, highlighting Jennings' unwavering commitment to his responsibilities and the Camp Community.

Describing a typical day at work with Jennings, Garvey paints a picture of efficiency and preparedness. "Mike always kept us supplied with what we needed to complete our projects, this is very important, and requires proper and prior planning to accomplish. Mike was always prepared for the many tasks at hand," Garvey recalls fondly. Jennings' organizational skills and foresight were instrumental in the smooth functioning of operations at Camp Ondessonk.

Reflecting on personal moments with Jennings, Garvey shares an anecdote that encapsulates Jennings' resilience and wisdom. "I appreciate Mike's ability to kick off the mud and carry on with the day. When we spoke of struggles or difficulties in life or work, he always conveyed that staying on a forward path was the best direction to take," Garvey recalls. It's a testament to Jennings' positive outlook and ability to inspire those around him, even in the face of adversity.

As Mike Jennings bids farewell to Camp Ondessonk after 30 years of dedicated service, his impact will be felt for years to come. Through his calm leadership, strong work ethic, and unwavering positivity, Jennings has left an indelible mark on the Camp community and the hearts of those like Norb Garvey, who had the privilege of working alongside him. As the sun sets on Jennings' tenure, his legacy shines bright, inspiring all who follow in his footsteps.



"I met Mike in the summer of 2017 when I volunteered in maintenance at Camp for the first time. He has always been so welcoming to all volunteers whether they were highly skilled or not. I hesitate to even guess the number of times over the years that Mike has heard questions like, 'Mike, how do I...? Mike, what should I do? Mike, can you help me with...? Mike, I need... Mike, where is...?'"

I doubt Mike knew that educator and counselor came with the Ranger job description when he started at Camp, but those skills have been key to his success in working with volunteers and staff. He empowers you to do things that you have never tried before, teaches you how to do them, and acknowledges your effort, even if you fail, and he does it all with a calm and confident demeanor. Empowering people can have a lifelong impact that brings another level of confidence to try new things in other areas of your life. Mike treats everyone as a member of his family. He is loved and his leadership, wisdom, and big heart will be greatly missed. He leaves Camp with an immeasurable legacy that has touched every inch of Camp's infrastructure, but also in the hearts of all who have worked with him. I wish Mike all the best in his well-deserved retirement, but I sure will miss seeing him when I volunteer at Camp."

Jean (Schwartz) Weiss:

Former Camper, Staff, Volunteer, Board Member, Donor

"Mike is THE BEST at getting the most out of volunteer workers. This style of his I witnessed many times. He is looked upon as a true leader by other leaders. Mike kept Camp O running with a consistent and determined demeanor as staff and personnel changed throughout the years. He is leaving behind a multitude of improvements to Camp O, from creative physical structures to social and spiritual sentiments that will live on for years to come. Enjoy thyself, you earned it!"

Tip Belz: *Former Camper, Former Board Member, Volunteer, Donor*

"I first met Mike & Becky at their home. We talked, got along great, and had fun. I went down for a Lodge Reunion one year, and Becky asked me if I'd like to go out for dinner. We stopped to pick up Lacy and remembered a funny story. A few years earlier I was still in California, but moving back to Illinois. I saw that Camp needed a riding mower & wanted to donate my dad's old one that just needed upkeep. Camp would need to pick it up in Collinsville, Ill. I called Camp, and spoke with whom I guessed was a very young Lacy. The message Mike got from Lacy was that someone in California wanted to donate a broken-down riding mower but that Camp needed to pick it up. Lacy thought a trip to LA would be awesome. Mike did not. Years later we had a great laugh about this!"



Pati Egan: *Former Camper, Staff, Volunteer, Donor*



"I really got to know Mike best when I was working as the H & S Director at Camp. He really was impressed with my skills at driving the one-ton truck and ensuring the rotators were cleaning the bathrooms appropriately. Mike is one of the most dedicated and hardest working men I know. He was always willing to roll up his sleeves and get dirty, taking care of business along with everyone else. Work hard and he'll respect you. Slack off and you might as well go find another job somewhere else. While he might sass you a bit, almost always I could get a laugh or smile out of him. When I was working the off season, I slipped and fell on my way to Central. As I got up and headed into Central, it was obvious that I had a very broken wrist. Mike was my knight in shining armor who took me into the hospital and waited for me while my wrist was getting set in a cast. His biggest concern was that I wouldn't get sick in his new truck on our way to the ER! He did take me by Dairy Queen on the way back to Camp, and Becky took very good care of me until my parents could come down and pick up me and my car for further treatment. There will never be another Camp Ranger like Mike...no filling of his shoes. Mike is a one of a kind who will go down in Camp history as the wonderfully unique individual that he is. Mike you truly are one of my favorite people. It's funny that throughout the last 20+ years, I still think of you and Becky as true friends despite the rare opportunities we have to see each other. I am sad that my kids won't get the chance to work with you as I did. I know you would have taught them many life lessons and held them accountable for doing great work. You and Becky will forever be in my heart. Love and hugs!"

Jamie (Dover) Gayer:
Former Camper, Staff, Volunteer, Donor

Remembering John Blue: A True Friend of the Jennings

A member of our Maintenance Family passed in June 2023 at his home in Goreville. Many of us knew him as "the Mow Man" at Camp Ondessonk. "He was a great employee," according to Ranger Mike. He went on to say that, "John became a good friend over the past five years he worked at Camp. He was like family. John was always joking making everyone's day brighter."



"Mike and I had many discussions on the role of the Camp Ranger and how previous Rangers handled the responsibilities of the position. It was always 'Camp first,' above any of the challenges/distractions that he faced at times. He was a silent leader, with locals, volunteers, and vendors all willing to contribute more, or volunteer more, when they knew Mike needed it for Camp. He was encouraging, always respectful of volunteers and what skills they brought to the job. When working on rebuilding Fournie Lodge, he was always asking how he could help in spite of that not being in the scope of his job/duties. His legacy is unforgettable. I would like to see him participate in Camp gatherings whenever possible. He's a great source of Camp knowledge, and a forever part of the Camp Family. Happy trails, don't be a stranger."

Steve Rheinecker: *Former Camper, Staff, Volunteer, Former Board Member, Donor*

"I remember being intimidated by Mike at first because he didn't speak much, and I had a sense that he meant business. As I got to know Mike, I have found him to be so friendly, caring, and hilarious. Mike always loved our staff gossip and had some hilarious feedback for us always. As a Camp kid, coming down with my family when I was very young, and then coming as a camper, and working on staff, Mike has been there throughout. He is a mainstay in my mind at Camp. He's been so vital to Camp and to keeping it running. He has impacted so many people; people who loved working maintenance to be in Mike's crew, people who volunteered because Mike ran jobs well. Mike has given his all to Camp and embodies the *Camp Spirit*. Mike, I can't thank you enough for your dedication to Camp. You fill a special place in my mind as a constant person at Camp since I was a child. I've been happy to know you and to work with you."

Amber Garvey: *Former Camper, Staff, Volunteer, Donor*



DAD: THROUGH THE EYES OF HIS DAUGHTER

By Amber Garvey

When speaking with Lacy (Jennings) Guard, we learned about her time living at Camp along with a special side of Ranger Mike.

What is your earliest memory of your Dad beginning work at Camp?

"I was eight when Dad started working there full-time. I have distinct memories of moving to Camp and walking into the house and thinking it was enormous. I was so excited to get to live in the middle of the woods."

Tell us what it was like moving to Camp? What was surprising?

"Moving to Camp really was a dream come true. At eight, I don't think I had any real expectations for my life at Camp, but I was excited for the adventure. I think the most surprising thing about living at Camp was the volume of people I would meet and develop lasting connections with."

What was it like to grow up at Camp?

"I certainly had a unique childhood. I was not only homeschooled, but I lived at this huge Camp. Our house had a revolving door. Someone was always visiting or just spending time there because they need a safe space to just be. I loved getting to know people from all walks of life."

What were some favorite things you would do with your Dad at Camp?



"One of my fondest memories as a young kid was to get to help Dad feed Yonah. He educated himself about black bears in order to care for Yonah, and he would pass that information on to me. I remember feeding Yonah boxes of Push Pops."

As I became a teen, and would have heartbreak, Dad and I would just walk through the woods when he would get off of work. We didn't have to talk about things. He taught me to find peace in nature. That is something that has stuck, and I have passed that on to my kids."

What were your observations of your Dad at work?

"As everyone knows, he has always been an incredibly hard worker. He worked like his life depended on it. To a degree, it did. We were far from wealthy, and he needed that job. As he got older and would get frustrated at work, I remember asking why he didn't try to find a new, less intense job. I remember him telling me that he did his job 'for the kids.' He knew how important that week or two out in nature was for the campers."

You would see a side of your Dad that others didn't see – the at-home Mike, the Dad Mike. How would you describe him as your Dad? How would he unwind?

"If I had to sum him up in one adjective, I would choose 'dedicated.' No matter what I did or went through, Dad was there. We still have many things we don't agree on, but that doesn't change his loyalty or make him love me any less. That's something that makes him especially unique; his dedication definitely is not conditional."

What did your Dad feel was important about his job?

"The people. As I said, making sure the campers had the best experience they could was his reason for doing his job. He truly loved the relationships he developed with staff and volunteers. He can have a deep conversation with someone he has only known for five minutes. Someone's socioeconomic status, gender, religion, etc. has never mattered to him. As long as you are genuine, he probably likes you."

What was it like to have the quiet of winter and then the constant chaos of Summer Camp?

The off-season was great because we would see Dad more often. Summers meant seeing him only in brief increments. Camp used to be very quiet in the off-season, and few things are as breathtaking as the forest when no humans are around. My friends always wanted to hang out at our house just so they could experience Camp. We spent so many days hiking and exploring."

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Your Dad has inspired so many people over the years. Why do you think he's able to influence and mentor folks?

"He has empathy. Dad can truly listen to someone. I think people feel safe talking to him because they know he respects their perspective even if he doesn't agree. That's a quality you have to have to successfully and positively influence someone."

What are you most proud of – for your Dad's work at Camp and for you as a family being part of Camp?

"I'm most proud of the relationships my parents have made. We have all made lifelong friends through our years at Camp."

What do you hope is your Dad's legacy at Camp Ondessonk?

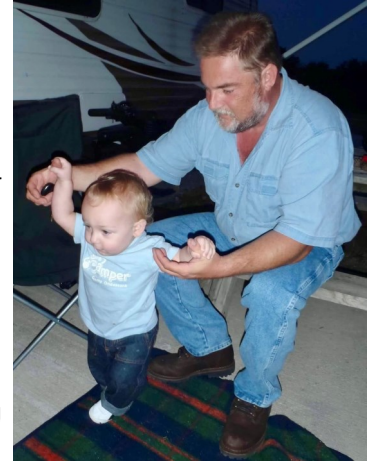
"As I have been planning this party and have spoken to many who have worked with Dad, I am repeatedly told that he's one of the good guys. I think he will be remembered for his kindness, and could I hope for anything better than that?"

What do you think it will be like for him to adjust to not being at Camp?

"I think he has been adjusting in steps and will do just fine. He has been working fewer and fewer hours over the past few years as age and experience have taught him that it's ok to put in a 40-hour week every now and then. He has hobbies and plans, and I look forward to seeing him move on to the next chapter. But Camp will always be a part of him. It helped shape him into the person he is."

What has the Camp Community meant to you and your family?

"Camp people are some of the most honest and kindhearted people I have ever met. I can tell story after story of times that Camp friends rallied behind someone long after their day of working together. I have experienced this personally. I just told my husband that this party will be like a huge family reunion. Camp people will always be a part of our family."



"I met Mike over 20 years ago when Luke Schutzenhofer and I plumbed up the Beach House. I recall having lunch at his house almost every day we had worked there. Since that time, I had no contact with him until

I returned to Camp last year to start work on the Pete Korte Lodge. It was good to see an 'old' familiar face. Not quite as old as mine. Once again, Mike made sure I was fed, having pow wow sessions after work - and maybe a few cocktails. Conversations came quite easy being so close to the same age. Camp will miss him greatly. Years of insight and knowledge are difficult to replace. That's what Camp Ondessonk is losing. Wish you well Mike. Enjoy your retirement."

Ken Luitjohan: *Employee, Korte Luitjohan Contractors, Inc.*

"I was the Assistant Ranger beginning in Fall of 1999. Since my brother, Keith, was Equestrian Director, I met Mike at a Stable Round-Up. Mike seemed down to earth, always busy. I had a good feeling about him – thought he'd be a good person to work for and with, and that turned out to be true for me. He was very outgoing, always talked with everyone. He had a good work ethic for sure. One of the coolest projects we did was the Shawnee Screamer - building the tower. Every project was fun to work on with him. I'd see it one way, he'd see it the other way, and we'd put our heads together and come with a good and inexpensive way to make it happen for Camp. I learned a lot from Mike, especially for what I do now – managing properties. He had a very positive impact on me. He's leaving behind some mighty big shoes to fill, especially with volunteer participation and bringing groups in. Even after a day of work, we'd hang out with the volunteers. His personal interactions were important for building community. I appreciate all the years working with Mike. I appreciate all the knowledge he showed and taught me. I wish you the best in retirement, Mike."

Eric Brennan – Former Staff, Volunteer, Donor



MIKE AND HIS DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

By Judy (Blase) Woodruff

About ten years ago, the late Dave McCoy expressed to Dan King that his earliest volunteer experiences decades before were often challenging because Camp simply wasn't prepared to fully utilize the help of volunteers. He went on to explain that their annual volunteer workday frustration subsided as Camp became better at preparing for volunteer workers. Dave said the gradual shift became profoundly better once Mike Jennings became the Ranger and Director of Maintenance at Camp Ondessonk in the mid-1990s. Mike had the tools, materials, and projects carefully outlined and ready to go for Dave's volunteer teams from St. Albert the Great Parish in Fairview Heights (now Holy Trinity Parish). Dave appreciated Mike's organizational skills and the resulting ability to "get to work" immediately.

Mike has been that organized leader at Camp Ondessonk for the past 30 years. His sincere care and concern for people allowed him to connect personally with hundreds of volunteers and staff who would come together because Mike Jennings asked.

Mike's most recent accomplishment is the building of the Pete Korte Lodge, a new duplex for full-time staff. He secured the help of dozens of volunteers, both construction professionals and skilled workers, to make this state-of-the-art home a reality. This shining jewel in Camp's crown is largely because of the expert leadership of our Ranger and Maintenance Director, Mike Jennings.

Frank Pace, from the Holy Trinity volunteers explains, "Dave McCoy led the St. Alberts volunteers in 1971 when he moved from volunteering for Camp at St. Philip's. I have been volunteering since the early 1980s, and took over the group for Dave when he stepped down. When asked about a special memory of Mike Jennings, Frank replied, "Mike's commitment and dedication to Camp, and the way he made sure he got to know each volunteer on a one-to-one basis stands out."

He feels Mike's legacy to Camp will last forever, and to witness it, all you have to do is look around Camp. "You would be hard pressed to find something he didn't have a hand in. I will miss Mike, the man. I am proud to call him my friend, and how easy he was to work with." Frank's wishes for Mike are simple, "Enjoy the fruits of all your hard labor, and know Camp would not be the special place it is without you, Mike!"



Holy Trinity Volunteers at Camp in 2023.



Jim Richter, left, representing Catholic Holy Family Society Council #82 of Breese, presented Ranger Mike and Dan King with a gift to support the construction of

Forty-five years ago, Jim Richter was persuaded by Lavern Kuhl and Vince Wesselmann to volunteer at Camp Ondessonk. It began a legacy that remains today with more than 30 dedicated volunteers from Breese, Ill., and the surrounding county.

Jim explains his relationship with the Ranger, "I've known Mike since probably his first year at Camp. Lavern Kuhl has probably been affiliated with Camp for 55-60 years, and Lavern has known Mike ever since he got there as well." The Clinton County volunteers unanimously say, "We love working with Mike, he always made sure we had enough to do and then he would say, 'Do what you can do and the rest I'll take care of.'"

Some of the projects the Clinton County Volunteers tackled were: building the new bathhouse; the haybarn; they worked on St. Noel; the pavilion by the Original Dining Hall; and Fournie Mini Camp Village. Their most recent major project has been the Pete Korte Lodge. "We put in a lot of hours, and Mike was always right there with us," Jim said. "It was always fun. He treats us with respect and we treat him with respect."

"It was always like Mike was one of our group. It didn't make a difference what his role was, in the evenings he would come down to our fire and talk. Becky and Lacy would join us as well and make sure that we had apple pie for dessert from time to time. It was like one big happy family. Mike will be missed dearly by the volunteers and the Camp staff. He's great to have as a good friend," said Jim.

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Ridgway Knights of Columbus Council #1581 Volunteers 2023

Another one of Mike's "go-to" volunteer groups is the Knights of Columbus Council #1581, Ridgway, Ill. Rick Zirkelbach, a dedicated member of this group, first met Mike about nine years ago. "He was such a welcoming and friendly person to work with, everyone enjoyed his company," explains Rick. He went on to say, "Mike is very knowledgeable and talented. He is well rounded and very capable with many trades. He was always committed and determined to do the best job for the Camp."

A common theme with this group, much like the others, is the feeling that Mike always treated the volunteers with respect and was grateful for their help. Rick explains, "He always made us feel how much he and Dan and the staff appreciated our efforts. The thing that impressed our group was, Mike was committed and dedicated even when his wife was going through health issues. Working with Mike, you always felt appreciated and

needed. He never let you forget how important your efforts were."

Rick went on to say, "Our Council volunteers have enjoyed coming to Camp and accomplishing needed projects. We have always appreciated Mike more than we can express. We only hope and pray Mike's replacement can carry on his legacy."

FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT, *Chris Cahnovsky*

"I first met Mike Jennings when he started working at Camp. It's a little fuzzy, but I believe he was being shown around Camp after we had an off-season social gathering, and I was resting in the Original Administration Building. I remember one evening shortly after Mike started, I received a call from him at home. He asked me about the locations of some water line. He could not get a hold of Dave Bretscher. I am sure I imparted some great wisdom, because he had to be desperate for information if he was calling me!



I have worked on countless projects with Mike. He was always a pleasure to work with even when I messed things up. He was cool and calm and very patient with us volunteers. I would love it when we were working in the pastures and Mike would roll up in the truck. I knew we were going to have some banter back and forth. Mostly I think of the patience he showed me over the years. I made a few carpentry mistakes at the Pete Korte Lodge, and Mike was so wonderful in his directions to fix things. I will greatly miss him.

Mike has the ability to draw people together for a common goal. His ability to form lasting and meaningful relationships has helped Camp complete many projects. He can mobilize a small army of skilled volunteers with a few phone calls. He can lead this group, and in few hours, you have four walls of a building up. He is an amazing man who we all love to work with. He knew how to lead people with respect to complete small projects to major building construction. He had the love and respect of the people he worked with.

Mike, I loved working with you all these years. I wish you the best of luck in retirement. At Camp we don't say goodbye, so when you find empty beer cans in your front yard, it is not litter, it is the 80s gang reminding you that you are loved!"



"The picture at the right is from when we were building the trail up to the new dining hall. Getting Mike to roll his eyes and laugh at me was always one of my favorite parts of the summer."

Megan (Bell) Jones



WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES TO MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

By Whitney Strang

Hearing “Fab Four” may bring to mind the famous group from Liverpool and screaming fans, but at Camp Ondessonk the group we call the “Loyal Four” is one that quietly works behind the scenes to help Ranger Mike Jennings complete projects on his never-ending to-do list. Made up of Jim Shively, Jim Stern, Ken Haas, and Kyle Keserauskis, they have worked closely with Mike on countless projects benefitting the campers of Ondessonk.



Ready to help at the drop of a hat, left to right, Kyle Keserauskis, Ken Haas, Jim Stern, and Jim Shively.

The group credits Mike with their ability to complete so many projects for Camp, noting his welcoming nature and preparation for big projects by making sure needed supplies, equipment, and skilled volunteers on-site when it's time to begin.

“It seems folks enjoy doing jobs that Mike assigns to them,” Jim Shively explained, “But it's more than that, because he always asks what they want to do. He motivates people, encouraging them to do the best job they can.”

They highlighted Mike's openness to volunteers at all skill levels by asking that all-important-question of what they would like to do rather than assigning tasks. Jim Shively remembered a time he saw this

firsthand. “Once, when asked what they would like to do, the volunteer said they didn't know how to do much. So, Mike set up the project (sanding a bench), got all the tools together, showed them where to work, and showed them how to do the job.”

“What makes Mike special is how he can juggle a lot of balls and keep them in the air at all times” Jim Stern explained, “He also has an innate ability to make anyone who works with him feel like they contributed to Camp. The feeling that Mike gave you was the feeling you wanted Camp to give to the kids. It's not an act, it's just who he is.”

Respected at Camp and in the greater community, the group is in awe of how Mike seems to know everyone. Recognizing his ability to make connections and show appreciation, Ken Haas acknowledged the impact this has had, “Everyone knows Mike! Not just in Southern Illinois, but in Kentucky and Indiana, too! There's no doubt his friendships have helped Camp complete projects early or underbudget because everyone is willing to answer the phone when he calls.”

Kyle Keserauskis agreed, “Mike's legacy at Camp Ondessonk is the relationships he has formed and nurtured during the past 30 years.”

Mike's dedication to Camp Ondessonk encouraged countless volunteers, including our own “Fabulous Four”, to work tirelessly for many, many years. More than any single project, they will remember their friendship and the sense of pride or reward when Mike has said, “You did a good job, thanks.”

THE VIEW FROM MIKE'S DESK

Ever wonder what Mike saw when he looked out onto his kingdom from the chair in his “office?” He saw a well-equipped Central Supply Building where everything had its place, and everything had better be in its place!

A prominent sign above the workbench in Central reads: “If you can't put it back in its place, don't use it! *Maintenance*”

Mike prided himself in knowing where the tools of several trades were, and while it might not look it, there most certainly was a rhyme to the reason!



HUSBAND / WIFE TEAM HAVE FOND MEMORIES OF RANGER MIKE

By Elizabeth Dirnbeck

Scott and Cindy Wobbe have been crucial members of Camp Ondessonk's volunteer workforce for many years, with Scott now sitting on Camp's Board of Directors. Over the past 15 years, they have become an important part of the Camp Family, building relationships with fellow volunteers, campers, and staff members along the way. Many of those relationships will last a lifetime, especially their beloved friendship with Camp Ranger, Mike Jennings.



Cindy first joined the maintenance crew and met Ranger Mike in 2015. She recalls being a bit worried, as she had never really done maintenance on anything. However, Cindy stated, "Mike quickly dissolved my worries. He is very patient and trusted us to do the tasks that we set out to do." When you first meet Mike, Scott explained, "Mike wants you to believe he is mean as a bear, but in all reality after you watch him work, he is a true leader, organizer, and a man who has a heart of gold." The Wobbes now describe Mike as "the best boss" and the guy with the slicked-backed hair, white beard, wearing his only blue and gray sweatshirt. Cindy mentioned, "He [Mike] is always willing to give an individual the opportunity to learn something new by doing a task or job. He always appreciates even the smallest job that we do."

After getting to know Mike and watching him work passionately at Camp, the Wobbes explained that a typical day at work with Mike consists of chatting over a morning cup of coffee, designating tasks from Mike's handwritten list of projects, worksite check-ins, and an end of the day discussion of project updates. Scott noted, "Mike makes sure you have everything you need and asks if you are having any problems." Scott further explained that during the work day, when he would go back to Central for more supplies, he was pleasantly ridiculed for goofing off, but was always sent back out with all needed supplies and a great big smile.

Scott and Cindy have had the opportunity to see the impact that Mike has made on the Camp Community that can only be described as enormous and long lasting. The Wobbes explained that Mike has touched numerous lives by offering advice and help when needed, even if it required coming in early or leaving late. Furthermore, Scott explained, "The amount of money Mike has saved Camp through his ability to network with volunteer groups and companies is inconceivable." Cindy expanded on Scott's statement by saying that Mike has brought in many new volunteers who continue to volunteer at Camp, in large part, because of Mike and the way he treats those he works with.



With Mike's career at Camp Ondessonk coming to an end, the Wobbes will miss Mike's listening ear and the ability to stop by and bounce ideas off him. They will reminisce on the standout projects they completed with Mike, such as putting a new roof on the Original Dining Hall; raising the walls at the Pete Korte Lodge; and even cleaning out the sand traps in Camp's sewage system. Scott and Cindy hope that Mike will take time to relax, spend time doing what he likes to do, and check off some bucket list items with his wife, Becky. The Wobbes, along with many other people in the Camp Community, feel that Camp will not be the same without Mike, but will continue to hold their fond memories with Mike close in their hearts.

"I worked with another individual called Cindy, last name Heintz, in maintenance. One day we walked into Central and Mike asked us, 'How do you ladies feel about sewage?' I said, 'OK, as long as it is in pipes.' Mike says, 'Well, the sand trap needs to be cleaned out, small trees/weeds need to be pulled. You can go to the barn and get boots and we have gloves.' Then he proceeded to show us the sand trap. He did not believe we would tackle the job, but we did clean it out and actually laughed a lot of the time." *Cindy Wobbe*

"Building the floor joist frame for the Mini Camp. It was very muddy conditions and a long day, but Mike was elbow to elbow with us. Hard worker, great guy."
The Volunteers of Knights of Columbus Council 1581, Ridgeway, Ill.

"Mike instructed Jim Stern and me to go into Harrisburg to pick up some materials. He told us to use a certain vehicle and off we went. On the way back, multiple vehicles that were following us flashed their lights and beeped their horns. We couldn't figure out what was wrong, even stopping once to make sure nothing was wrong (lights, tires, cargo, etc.). When we got back, we were telling him about the folks who were signaling us. That's when he laughed and said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you: The speedometer is off by 15 mph. So if it's reading 55, you are actually going 40." *Jim Shively*

It was the summer of 2020 and we had rented Chabanel for a couple nights so that our family didn't miss a year at Camp. Mike saw that we were registered as guests, drove out to the unit, found us at the campfire ring, and greeted me with a big Mike bear hug, COVID be damned." *Sara (Bell) Clifford*

WHAT DO YOU THINK MIKE WILL DO IN RETIREMENT?

Camp Ondessonk Friends were asked what they thought Ranger Mike would do after he retires, and we received a variety of thoughts on the subject.

Elizabeth "Liz" (Nimnicht) Abaray feels he will "work on projects that he enjoys and spend time with his family. I hope he won't worry about what's happening at Camp."

Norb Garvey wants to stay in touch with Mike as he hopes "Mike shows me his best mushroom hunting spots!"

According to Eric Brennan, "I know he used to like to fish a lot, and I hope he gets back in to that, and take his grandson fishing." But he also added, "I'm hoping he'll take the time to travel now that he's not tied down, and see all the sites he's put off visiting all these years."

Jamie (Dover) Gayer expressed, "I hope he will travel with Becky and actually enjoy a summer off for the first time in 30 plus years!"

Tip Belz exclaimed, "Fish, hunt, follow sports, and have fun!"

Jim Shively states, "I cannot imagine him sitting around, he's going to do something. I hope he continues to come to Camp to visit and to enjoy the 'Camp' camaraderie."

According to Eric Brennan, "I know he used to like to fish a lot, and I hope he gets back in to that, and take his grandson fishing." But he also added, "I'm hoping he'll take the time to travel now that he's not tied down, and see all the sites he's put off visiting all these years."

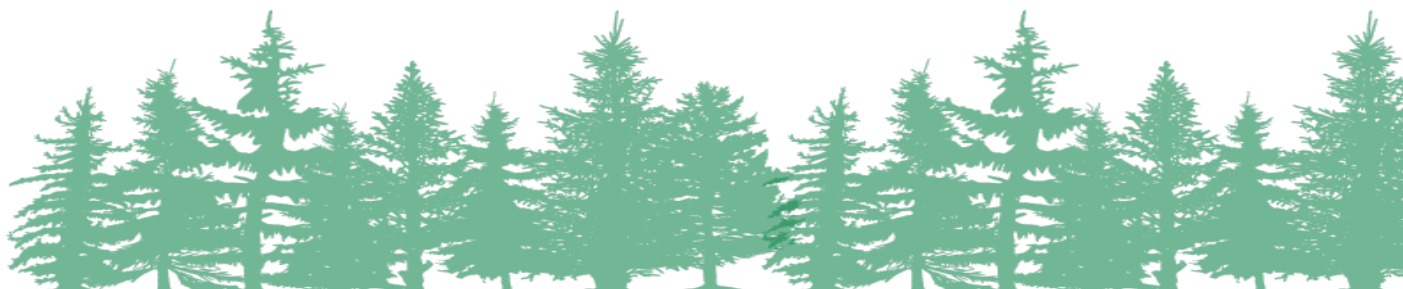
Gregg Korte of Korte Luitjohan Contractors, Inc., said he "can't see him doing any sitting still. He'll have an active retirement whatever it is."

Rick Zirkelbach from the Ridgway Knights of Columbus Volunteers said, "I believe Mike will enjoy his family and hobbies."

Jim Richter, who has volunteered at Camp for 47 years along with the dedicated Clinton County crew, has known Mike since he was first hired at Camp. Jim states, "Mike always said that he'll try to come back and volunteer with us. He's great to have as a good friend."

It looks as though some think Mike won't be taking it easy, as Scott Wobbe says, "He will be busier than he is now. As one person said, retirement is the ability to do the things you want to do at the pace you want to do them. I'm hoping I can sucker Mike into helping me remodel my house! Seriously, I hope he takes some time for himself and Becky to do some of their bucket list items they have." Scott's wife, Cindy, thinks "Mike will increase his taxicab service for his grandkids." But she hopes "he will relax and spend some time doing what he likes to do. Maybe some gardening. Maybe I can talk him into helping Scott and me remodel our house!" The Wobbes seem to have plans for Mike's retirement, and it's not relaxing!

What do you think Mike will be up to during his retirement? He has put Camp and his Camp Friends in the forefront for 30 years. So, whatever is on the agenda for his retirement, we all wish him many happy and healthy years doing what HE wants to do...maybe accomplishing some honey-dos along the way!





Camp Ondessonk

*Congratulations to our dear friend and his family.
We appreciate what you all have done for
Camp Ondessonk throughout the years, and we thank Becky
and Lacy for sharing Mike with Camp for three decades!
Mike, you and your family will be missed!*

