



Memorable moments, despite an empty calendar

by Tom Coombe
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For the second time this year, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought parts of life to a standstill.

Through next weekend, and perhaps longer, a slew of activities that help define us here and elsewhere in the state are noticeably absent.

Most involve social activity, with gyms and movie theaters closed, restaurants severely limited, bars and event halls dark, and sporting events in the midst of a "pause."

A drive down Ely's quiet Sheridan Street, especially at night, can be downright depressing.

Some businesses in town have simply called it quits, waiting with hope for spring, better times and fewer government mandates. Others face thousands upon thousands in lost revenue and are wondering how they'll survive the winter.

For me, weekends usually jam-packed with activities and events are now absent of plans and schedules for a second time this year.

Saturday was shaping up to be another one of those days on the home front.

The first weekend of December, or really most winter weekends, typically come with a full slate.

Whether it's basketball or hockey, high school or college, AD work or media coverage, or the occasional ski meet, the local sports calendar eats up every Friday night and Saturday.

When sports don't prevail, we try to find time for a weekend getaway with the kids or rarer yet, there's the chance husband-and-wife trip to the Cities or a



GETTING help from Corral Meskill was Macy Coombe on Shagawa Lake last weekend.

once-a-season flight to Vegas - usually during the NFL playoffs.

Last weekend promised nothing in the way of activity, at least when the weekend began, and Hollee's trip for groceries served as the most eventful part of a quiet Saturday afternoon.

Until Macy stepped in.

Our six-year-old had her own ideas once Hollee pulled the minivan out of the driveway.

"Come on dad, let's have a coloring contest," she said.

Coloring? Me? I conned my way through eighth-grade art class and haven't had a crayon or paint brush in my hand since. The first-grader in our house, however, has developed an appreciation and love of art in her young age, but that trait surely didn't come from her father.

Yet boredom, guilt and obli-

gation prevailed and to the kitchen table I went.

Macy's enthusiasm was infectious and endearing, and I couldn't help but be drawn in.

She offered a few pointers as she colored animals and her favorite unicorns and asked me to do the same.

A few minutes had turned to a half hour and I'll concede it was enjoyable, especially to see Macy's enthusiasm.

She's only in first grade and already months of her education have been irrevocably altered by the pandemic. First came the spring shutdown that robbed her of her last two-and-a-half months of kindergarten and the socialization that goes with it. Now a few more weeks, and hopefully no more than that, of distance learning.

Macy has adjusted better than her parents, and her first-grade teacher, Clara Roy, has made the transition as best as it can possibly be. First grade isn't meant for Zoom meetings or recorded lessons, but Clara has done a marvelous job of preparing her students and their parents, and Macy has lit up with joy to see her friends and teacher via Zoom.

Our Saturday coloring was nearing an end, so I thought, when Macy tapped me on the shoulder and said "it's time for the three marker challenge."

For eight minutes, we each used three markers or crayons from her extensive collection and came up with our own masterpieces. It's safe to say

the first grader won, but Macy provided a few words of encouragement after her victory.

Sunday's schedule was vacant as well, but mild temperatures and early ice provided another unique opportunity.

Like seemingly everyone else with young kids, we wound up on a frozen lake on one of numerous makeshift ice rinks.

Hollee's sister Heidi, our niece Corral and her three-year-old Beau and several other friends and family members were enjoying the day and invited Macy along.

Macy's trepidation about frozen lakes - not long ago she was scared when we would drive by one - didn't last.

After more than an hour of sledding and running, she donned a pair of skates for the first time in her life. And loved it.

Heidi, Corral and Hollee took turns holding her, and within minutes she was hanging on to a folding chair and trying her own skills.

Minutes turned to an hour and then another hour and we were ready to go home, but Macy would have none of it. She had



BETTER THAN DAD - Macy Coombe's artistic skills may have outdone her dad Tom as they both did some coloring.

more skating and sliding to do with her aunt and would get a ride home.

There's no need to borrow skates for her next visit as she now has her own, and her grandma Peg joked that figure skating may be next. She could very well be right.

If my social media feed was any indication, a few families also made lemonade out of lemons last weekend, filling the void of cancellations and scrapped events to create some memories.

In a decade-and-a-half as a parent, whether it's with the boys or with Macy, there's no greater joy than seeing your kids smile, seeing them happy, forging a bond with activities that go beyond the ordinary. A coloring contest or the first time skating, or perhaps a trip to a game or a New Year's Eve dinner at a four-star restaurant. Bonds are created. Memories made.

Those planned events will resume soon without a doubt, with permission or without. But last weekend showed that even an empty calendar can lead to moments that will forever live on.



Kawishiwi Lodge to be listed on National Register of Historic Places

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the Boundary Waters Journal where my dad said he had 15 customers. I asked him about it and said it was under 10."

But perseverance paid off and "Doc" Udovich continued to be available to his dental customers 24 hours a day in town, running back and forth to wherever he was needed.

And the location was always a big seller since canoeists had to paddle past their resort on their way from Lake One to Lake Two and beyond.

"Our biggest draw is people paddling past and they see the cabins and a stack of canoes.

"I don't make a great living renting canoes I need to rent cabins. One of the easiest things to do is rent a cabin and one of the hardest thing to do is to rent a canoe on a canoe only lake."

Struggles can come in all forms and at Kawishiwi it included federal legislation and a federal disaster in the form of the Pagami Fire.

"This really is an amazing place somebody put here with great struggle. At the time there were like 42 businesses sold off to the feds. You think about the resorts on Basswood Lake and this place would've been a resort just like the ones on Basswood."

Realizing the history of the Basswood Resorts was either burned to the ground or dragged out on the ice to be sunk to the bottom of the lake made Udovich realize the importance of Kawishiwi Lodge for the area's history.

"That's why I pushed to get it on the National Register. Ma and pa resorts are disappearing, there's not many left. I've been living at the resort for 28 years and if it's been here 100 years that's only about 25 percent of the time.

"One of the reasons it was successful was because

it was one of the first resorts that had power. And that's because Frank Zgonc was county commissioner and he got power out there.

You would not think of this as a luxury resort but it was before there were luxury resorts. It's like the American Dream where you had people who worked their rear ends off and they were rewarded for it handsomely.

"It was a busy place, you had to work all hours of the day and night and they're still like that where they're excited to get here and they want to go fishing in the morning."

Those customers who came with their children years and years ago have passed on the love for Kawishiwi Lodge.

"This year somebody told me they were the sixth generation of Kawishiwi customers. Now you think that goes back to the days when people would get out of their vehicles to go over the Garden Lake bridge or the crossing at Uncle Judd's Creek in case the car fell in."

Even today, many people arrive at Kawishiwi Lodge and don't make trips back to town.

And when other economies suffered, Kawishiwi and other Ely resorts did well.

"When you had the market crash in 2008 that helped us because they couldn't take expensive vacation. They couldn't go to Europe for \$5,000 but they could go to Kawishiwi for \$1,000. The average ma and pa operation had a boom.

"And Covid introduced a bunch more people to Ely, especially with the Canadian border being closed. Sometimes when there's a big downturn in the national economy, Ely reacts in the opposite," said Udovich.

"And I pass that money in a circle in Ely by buying products and services in town. And this year, especially with Covid, customers have never been more

appreciative than they were this year.

"I owe all of this to the Zgonc family and my dad. It's been a struggle at times but we've made it work," said Udovich.

That includes the Pagami Fire that ravaged the number lakes and reduced the number of permits available out of Lake One.

"People don't realize this but that killed one of the most easiest entry points. Fire is way of nature so is cancer but you don't want either one around. You want fire somewhere else or when you're gone. It decimated Lake One and then they cut permits by four."

The number of permits out of Lake One has dropped for 23 to 18 to 14.

Again, it was perseverance and hard work that kept the resort going with 2020 being one of the best years. Being the recipient of a national award may make the work seem worthwhile.

"I invited people from the Minnesota Historical Society to come up to see what we have and they were blown away by the significance and story of the property. Nothing holds a candle to its historical significance."

Udovich said the remodeling that was done on the cabins was on the inside, to leave the look the same as when they were built.

"We have redone all the cabins on the inside but if there was graffiti from 1930s and 1940s on the walls, we kept that."

While there are some who come back to reminisce it doesn't include the Zgonc family.

"There are very few Zgonc relatives around. John and Frank never had kids, Molly and Marge never had kids."

Since the Udovich family has owned the resort they have replaced two cabins and added three for a total of 19.

"With the resort pushing 20 cabins the maintenance

is staggering but the maintenance is kept up.

"It's still a sought after place and people love we're still making memories."

"We don't have granite countertops. I'm looking for someone who used to go in the Boundary Waters and now wants to stay in a cabin where the high water mark is the start of the BWCA. There's no internet in the cabins and very little cell service. And we don't allow any audible noise outside the cabins.

"It's a very specific niche market but there's a lot of people who want to be on a lake with a screen porch and a fire pit. You can have that on Insula or Basswood but you can't have a cabin. I put what we have with any place in the world except the owner works there.

"It being a canoe only resort helps my business. We're the only one in the world obligated by law to only have canoes.

"What's interesting is many years ago when there still wasn't a road here, Frank and John Zgonc dynamited the channel so it was deep enough to get a motorboat through.

"When the Fernberg Road was put in around 1932 to Lake One, people would go to the public access and motor from the public access to the bay to get here. There wasn't a driveway until the early 1940s.

"Also, our property was never logged. It has massive beautiful old growth pines on it. We've always had beautiful trees some of the oldest biggest trees are there."

Getting on the National Register is an honor for the resort and reflects the hard work of all those who have worked at Kawishiwi Lodge.

"This is an amazing hon-



LAKE ONE'S FINEST Molly Zgonc holds a northern at Kawishiwi Lodge.

or. It took parts of five years, we started in 2016 and we won't actually get the plaque until early next year."

Kawishiwi Lodge is a family owned and operated resort. Frank and Nicole have three kids and who are an integral part of the operation.

"They are like an attraction of their own. We have kids who come from year after year and our kids are ambassadors, they're like the liaison for kids. Right away they're teaching them to do stand up paddleboard or play ghost in the graveyard, catching frogs, playing pinball, fishing off the docks or cooking s'mores at the end of the day. We put 100 to 110 people in camp a week and up to 35 are under 16 years old."

Son Frank is just nine years old but he's in his second year of helping to clean cabins. Violet is a social butterfly at age 11 and Penelope is just four.

"Frank and I make beds together every single day. They do the garbage with me and they can talk about the lake, day permits and fishing."

"Violet is 11 and she's so social. Plus she can shuttle with the golf cart anything

you need. She's the one spearheading the activities. The kids roam the property 16 hours a day. We may put sunscreen on them five times a day but I'm getting the full reward out of sacrifices my dad and the Zgoncs made.

Frank Udovich was sure to give credit to who he defined as the key to the whole operation, his wife of 13 years, Nicole.

"Nicole redid the website, answers phone calls and is emailing 24/7 while living and working out there.

"We lived out there for a few years without running water - how many women would do that? When she got here she bumped up the rates and made everything easier, more productive and more efficient."

Frank Udovich also acknowledged other resort families in the area who were always forthcoming with help and information.

"Like the Olsons, the LaMontagnes, the Hotalings, the Baltich's and the LaTourells for example, I am grateful for their help they gave me. Those people run good businesses."

Udovich also gathered much of the information on the resort from the Skraba brothers, Roger and Jerome and former manager Harry Homer.

And when the snow melts and people begin showing up at Kawishiwi Lodge in 2021, they may notice the plaque stating they are staying at a National Register of Historic Places site.

"They'll come and stay in Scandinavian style cabins with a view of the lake, just like people did starting in 1924," said Udovich.