

Phyllis Wheatley Community Center

CAMP KATHARINE PARSONS

A Restoration Project and Capital Campaign

2023 Project Description



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Camp Katharine Parsons Restoration

Spring 2023

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Phyllis Wheatley Community Center (PWCC), a legacy organization working to bring equity and equality to Minneapolis' North Side, has always worked toward a singular mission — to create educational, recreational, and restorative opportunities for African American families to thrive. Our goal is for individuals to discover their strengths and take control of their futures — which, throughout most of our long history, has included providing camping and outdoor recreation experiences that teach, heal, and inspire through nature.

PWCC has evolved alongside the African American and growing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community, from its early beginnings rooted in the Settlement House movement, through to today, keeping pace with community needs in various arenas, including childcare, education, recreation, health, and emotional and social wellness. We do this through a number of different training, restorative, and enrichment programs designed to create opportunities for our historically marginalized community.

PWCC has a rich history of providing outdoor and camping experiences for its young people and families, beginning in the 1940's when it leased a camp in Savage, Minnesota. It lost that space due to the war and subsequently engaged in various efforts to lease or buy another camp, taking kids to Brainerd and attempting to buy a spot in Amery, Wisconsin.

1301 North 10th Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55411



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Finally, in 1956, a long-time board member and PWCC supporter, Ms. Katharine Parsons, arranged for the purchase of a parcel of land on Oak Lake in Carver County and hired renowned architect and early environmentalist Lloyd B. Sharp to build the camp that we seek to restore today. Katharine Parsons, who herself grew up in Fergus Falls, MN, was motivated by her belief that children in the PWCC community should have the same opportunities as almost any other Minnesota kid — the chance to attend summer camp, partake in outdoor adventure, learn appreciation for the environment, and build character along the way.

As part of a developmental strategy aimed at providing youth with experiences that create great citizens, PWCC created programming to expose African American youth to the outdoors and to nature— long before the environmental movement took hold in the United States.

For the next nearly 50 years, PWCC staff spent summers taking busloads of youth to Camp Katharine Parsons every day, exposing generations of Northside youth to camp experiences that are a time-honored and critical piece of Minnesota’s cultural heritage. There, campers from the PWCC community learned valuable life skills that prepared them for success as adults; they experienced nature and all of its benefits for the mind and body; and they found mentorship, guidance, stability, safety, and structure. Some campers went on to become camp counselors and then leaders in the wider Minnesota community, in just the same way that many other Minnesota children have.



In the early 2000’s, the Camp’s infrastructure fell into disrepair and PWCC ended the summer sessions out of concerns for children’s safety. Since then, sadly, PWCC was unable to sustain the beautiful 106-acre property and its buildings, utilizing it only occasionally for special events. Leadership at PWCC sought many times to revive and restore the camp but were pulled away by other unforeseen circumstances requiring more critical intervention in North Minneapolis (such as the national recession and then the devastating tornado of 2011).

Remarkably, the camp stands as a testament to how important it is to the community, PWCC has retained ownership of Camp Katharine Parsons; and, over the past 20 years, it has remained mostly dormant. During that time, the property has grown into a wildlife refuge for all sorts of birds and plant life. And a refuge it shall remain — today, PWCC is committed through an agreement with the Minnesota Land Trust to preserve 90% of the property as a natural resource and restore the other 10% to its original purpose — as a camp for the PWCC community, with educational outreach to its Carver County neighbors.

With PWCC’s impending Centennial Celebration and a state-wide focus on environmental justice and equity, the time is ripe to see the camp through to its full restoration, in keeping with modern safety standards, zoning, and environmental restrictions. Generations of young people have now missed out on the opportunities that their parents and grandparents had — to thrive and build awareness and appreciation for greater Minnesota outdoors, along with community values and leadership skills.



Camp Katharine Parsons Programming Pillars

- Youth Day Camp for kids primarily from North Minneapolis
- Environmental Education
- Outdoor adventure opportunities for BIPOC community



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Our goal is to provide the critical enrichment experiences and outdoor adventures the camp once offered youth and families from our North Minneapolis community. This offering was mostly in the form of summer day camps, with limited overnight camping experiences, and we do not intend to exceed that scope. In undertaking the restoration of our camp, we honor and recognize Phyllis Wheatley's long history.

The Settlement House movement recognized the fact that all individuals and communities possess aspirations and strengths that can produce responsible, committed citizens at Camp Katharine Parsons, we will create a pathway for youth, teens, and young adults to discover their individual strengths and love for the outdoors, and encourage them to pursue their aspirations. We also take pride in PWCC's heritage in the outdoors and camping spaces, and its commitment to environmental equity, begun over 80 years ago, and now revived. As a movement toward the reclamation of outdoor spaces by BIPOC people gathers momentum nationwide, PWCC is reaching back to its historical roots in providing leadership through the restoration of its long-cherished Camp Katharine Parsons. Bringing that dream to fruition will help revive the social health and well-being of our equally beloved PWCC community members, reuniting them with their natural roots in Minnesota's majestic outdoors.

Be a part of the restoration of Camp Katharine Parsons and building a generation of healthy, productive, happy future leaders.

Donate at www.givemn.org/story/Campkatharine

For more information, visit www.phylliswheatley.org/camp