

Phyllis Wheatley Center asks Gov. Walz for funding to re-open Camp Katherine Parsons

By David Pierini, Editor

One of Kimberly Caprini's most vivid childhood memories was being led with her fellow summer campers at night, their eyes closed tight, to a remote part of an island.

The counselor stopped the group, asked them to tilt their heads up and open their eyes. Caprini screamed. In the dark clear sky, billions of bright stars twinkled. It was terrifying and beautiful.

Just 45 minutes away from the Phyllis Wheatley Center, Camp Katherine Parsons in Watertown, Minn., gave North Minneapolis kids, including Caprini, such never-before-seen moments for more than four decades.

"I want our kids to be able to have those experiences, they're just so important," Caprini, now the family engagement coordinator at the community center, said on Jan. 10 as staff proposed to a visiting Gov. Tim Walz that the state help fund revival of a camp that was shuttered in the

1990s.

The center's executive director, Suzanne Burk, presented a \$4 million plan that would rehab the five existing buildings, which includes cabins for boys and girls, and build out science and conservation programs that could provide year-round activities for Northside kids.

The community center is among several state agencies and organizations asking their projects be included in a proposed \$2.7 billion bonding bill. Other Northside groups seeking inclusion in the bonding bill include North Commons Park and V3 Sports, which seeks funding from the proposed bill to construct a facility to house an Olympic-size swimming pool.

Walz, Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan and state Rep. Esther Agbaje, the vice chair of the Capital Investment Committee, also visited V3 Sports, which last year purchased the 50-meter pool used at the U.S. Olympic Trials and now is raising money to reassemble it.

Walz expressed enthusiasm for placing

both the V3 Sports pool and the Phyllis Wheatley Center camp in the bonding bill.

"We're glad to support it," Walz said. "We saw two (projects) today that are going to show our kids, especially in North Minneapolis, that we care and that they deserve everything everyone else has. You don't have to go to Eden Prairie to swim in a pool and you don't have to have a connection up north to have the opportunity to be outside and have good, quality programming."

The history of how Phyllis Wheatley was gifted the camp in 1956 is as mysterious as the stars Caprini first saw as a kid.

A librarian named Katherine Parsons donated the 106-acre camp on Oak Lake in Carver County. Parsons didn't live in Minneapolis, but officials believe there was some connection to North Minneapolis through her father.

Parsons had granted Wheatley Center access to the camp in the 1940s before gifting it to the center.

The property looks like an island because

it is attached to a thin peninsula, and Walz marveled that the Wheatley Center was able to resist selling it to developers and investors. The center worked with the Minnesota Land Trust to preserve the natural lands that make up the camp.

With \$4 million, the buildings could be rehabbed to exceed current energy standards and air quality requirements. An additional building would be built to house accessible toilets and showers and provide additional storage space. The Science Museum of Minnesota would partner with the Wheatley Center to provide programming.

"We believe this will be a place for young people to be able to explore, learn about the environment, have a wonderful experience and just be free," Burks said.

If the bonding bill passes with money for the camp, kids could be camping at the site by 2024, the 100th anniversary of the Phyllis Wheatley Center.

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