



CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS

Summer 2025 Newsletter

- A New Preserve to Honor Our Founders
- More Than A Hike
- Summer Events & Programs



A NEW PRESERVE TO HONOR OUR FOUNDERS

Peter Van Nice had spent summers in Lakeside since his childhood, and in the late 1990's he retired here. But he foresaw a potential problem: the growing popularity of this area was leading to an increase in development, which was beginning to change the landscape.



Left to Right: Steve and Jean Smith, Jeanie and Peter Van Nice

Always a champion of conservation, Peter decided to set up a land conservancy in southern Berrien County. He recruited his wife Jeanie and friends Jean and Steve Smith and forged ahead, incorporating Chikaming Open Lands in December of 1999.

In the years that followed, Peter, Jeanie, Steve and Jean worked tirelessly to cultivate Peter's vision, growing COL into a fully operational land trust with full-time staff, offices, and a portfolio of protected natural areas. When Peter passed away in 2022, COL's Board and staff wanted to pay tribute to Peter's legacy and recognize all four of the organization's founders by dedicating a new nature preserve in their honor.



Vernal pool in the middle of the Founders Preserve property

Recently, we found the perfect piece of land to do just that. Prominently situated on Three Oaks Road in Chikaming Township, the 87-acre property features high-quality forest, wetland, and a former agricultural area that is perfect for a native prairie restoration.

We decided to jump on the opportunity with a goal to acquire this beautiful open space by year's end. Upon acquisition, the land would be dedicated as the Founders Preserve and will be forever protected in its natural state. We plan to create a trail system throughout the preserve and improve public accessibility with a parking area, educational signage, and other amenities.

This summer and fall, we will be actively working to raise funds to acquire this property.... stay tuned for more on how you can help with that effort!



Join us for a fun and relaxed evening in a beautiful setting. This year's event is being held at Jeanie Van Nice's stunning 10-acre property on the Lake, featuring a lovingly restored prairie that in August will be blanketed with summer blooms.

But what makes the location truly special? Jeanie and her late husband, Peter Van Nice, are founders of COL—the organization was brought to life at the kitchen table of this very Lakeside home.

COL is seeking to to acquire a new nature preserve that will become the "Founders' Preserve," named in honor of the organization's four founders. As always, the Annual Benefit supports COL's mission of permanently preserving our community's cherished natural open spaces... and this year, we'll also be raising funds for the acquisition of the Founder's Preserve.

For more information, please contact Lolly Roberts at (269) 405-1006 or LRoberts@chikamingopenlands.org. Tickets go on sale June 27th.

MORE THAN A HIKE:

How Two Couples Turned a Local Challenge Into a Beloved Tradition

Every weekend in July, you're likely to find four friends—and a pair of happy dogs—walking the winding paths of a Chikaming Open Lands' preserve. To outsiders, they might just look like hikers. But to Tim Sullivan (Sully), Mike Humphrey, MK Czerwiec, and Cindy Homan these trails are something more: a gathering place, a wellness practice, a sanctuary, and over time, a shared ritual that's deepened their connection to each other—and to the land.



Sully, MK, Mike and Cindy during July 4th themed #10Trail Challenge weekend in 2024

The four have been close friends for more than 25 years, originally brought together by a mutual friend who lives near what is now Jens Jensen Preserve. Back then, they walked that land when it was just a local secret—a fitting start to a friendship rooted in a love for nature and nurtured by miles of trail.

“To see it preserved now, knowing we’ve walked these same paths for decades—it means something,” Mike remarked.

Each summer, as Chikaming Open Lands unveils the preserves for the #10Trail Challenge, this tight-knit crew springs into action. Mike and MK, the team's logistics duo, pull out a paper calendar and start color-coding weekends, mapping out trail groupings to maximize time and mileage. Five hikes in a day? Absolutely. Throw in a stop at a historic site—like the Chicago World's Fair homes near Indiana Dunes—and you've got a full-blown adventure.

These trails are a gathering place, a wellness practice, a sanctuary, and over time, a shared ritual that's deepened their connection to each other—and to the land.

“Ten trails? No way. We do the Extreme 15!” they joke, recalling muddy hikes, selfie-station scavenger hunts, and even that sweltering, bug-filled day when they had to call the COL office for backup mid-hike.

MK and Cindy have completed the #10Trail Challenge every year since it began in 2018. A few years in, they invited Mike and Sully to join them for a hike—and the foursome have been an unstoppable (and endlessly entertaining) trail team ever since. After spending just one hike with them, it’s easy to see why they’ve become inseparable.

They’ve tackled the Challenge together for years—sometimes in matching shirts, occasionally bringing other friends along, and always with snacks, songs, and plenty of laughter. While Mike and MK take the lead on logistics, mapping out routes and packing essentials like animal crackers and gummy bears, Sully and Cindy keep the mood light with their humor. Cindy might break into a Camp Fire Girls song mid-hike, and Sully once showed up to a dog-themed hike with a stuffed pup filling in for their real dog—who clearly isn’t as committed to the hiking challenge as his humans are.



MK, Mike, Simon, Sully, Cindy, and a friend during the 2021 Challenge



Mike and Sully with their stuffed pup during the 2023 Challenge

Their reasons for returning year after year are as personal as the trails themselves. For Sully and Mike, who spend their weekdays in the bustling city of Chicago, it’s about escaping the constant noise—both the chaos of city life and the digital distractions.

“It frees your mind and body,” Sully says. “You just feel better.”



Sully, MK, Cindy, and Mike at Robinson Woods Preserve

For Cindy, it's about honoring the harmony between people, animals, and plants: "We need to do our part to ensure there are some spaces in this crazy world where that balance holds true." And for MK, an artist and end-of-life care nurse, it's a source of spiritual grounding: "Retreating into the woods is my church. I cherish watching the seasons unfold with their annual cycles of birth and death."

Their favorite trails mirror their personalities and the stories they've written together on the land. Tim delights in the quiet surprises of Robinson Woods Preserve and the wildflowers tucked along Sugarwood Forest Preserve's paths. MK is drawn to the shifting terrain and mossy cisterns of Chris Thompson Memorial Preserve, where the landscape feels both sacred and alive. Cindy's heart belongs to Burns Prairie Preserve, especially when it bursts into bloom. And Mike finds peace in places that still feel untouched, where nature hasn't yet been edged out by progress.



Burns Prairie in bloom, photographed by MK during the 2021 Challenge

"Even here in Harbor Country, we're seeing more and more development," Mike says. "Zoom out to a global level—deforestation, habitat loss, species disappearing—and it can feel overwhelming. **That's why it matters so much to protect what we still have.**"

“We support COL because we want these trails to be here—always,” MK adds. “For ourselves, for others, and for the generations who’ll follow us.”



Sully, Mike, Cindy and MK at Turtle Creek Preserve during the 2024 Challenge

For Mike, Sully, MK, and Cindy, the #10Trail Challenge has become more than a checklist.

The miles they log celebrate nature, create memories, and offer space to laugh, reflect, and recharge. In a world of growing development and constant distractions, they’ve built something enduring by walking forward—one trail, one selfie station, one gummy bear at a time.

Do you have a favorite trail, view, or resting spot in the woods? Share it with us at col@chikamingopenlands.org.

JOIN THE CHALLENGE!

Take the #10Trail Challenge and explore the great outdoors by hiking any 10 of our 15 featured trails during the month of July. Looking for an extra adventure? Go all in with the #Extreme15—hike all 15 trails and earn a chance to win a special prize from one of our sponsors!



July 1st - 31st

How it Works:

- Step 1. Register Online
- Step 2. Hike the Trails
- Step 3. Take a Selfie
- Step 4. Win Prizes!

For more information and to register visit chikamingopenlands.org/10trailchallenge

2025 SUMMER EVENTS

Kayak & Brews: Pride Paddle

June 6 | 2:00 - 5:00 PM ET | Galien River Marsh & Ghost Isle Brewery
See additional details on page 11.



Eastern Box Turtle Survey

Mon. June 9 | Time TBD | Myron Perlman
Nature Preserve



Join us for a unique conservation experience as COL welcomes John Rucker and his dogs to one of our preserves to help locate and monitor Eastern box turtles!

Stewardship Day: Grand Beach Marsh Preserve

Sat. June 14 | 10 AM - Noon ET

We've been controlling invasive Phragmites at Grand Beach Marsh for six years and need your help to keep making progress. Bring footwear like rubber boots that can get wet and weather-appropriate clothing.

#10Trail Challenge

July 1st - July 31st

This July, the #10Trail Challenge will be back for the 8th year in a row! See additional details on page 7.

Stewardship Day: Flynn Woods Preserve

Sat. July 12 | 10 AM - Noon ET

Join COL in controlling invasive shrubs throughout this 35-acre preserve located in Three Oaks, MI. No equipment or experience is required to participate. Just wear sturdy shoes and weather-appropriate clothing.

Toad Homes

July 14 | 11:30 AM ET | New Buffalo Township Library

Join New Buffalo Township Library and Chikaming Open Lands to make toad homes from clay pots.

& STEWARDSHIP DAYS

July Kayak & Brews

July 21 | 2:00 - 5:00 PM ET | Galien River Marsh & Ghost Isle Brewery

See additional details on page 11.

Monarch Festival

Sat. Aug. 2 | 11 AM - 3 PM ET | Love Creek Nature Center



COL is proud to partner with Love Creek Nature Center for the 3rd Annual Monarch Festival! Spend the afternoon enjoying crafts, snacks and learning about monarch butterflies and other beneficial pollinators.

Annual Benefit: Cocktails & Coreopsis

Sat. August 9

Enjoy a fun and relaxed evening with cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, a silent auction & raffle! See additional details on page 3.

Stewardship Day: Chapman Nature Preserve

Sat. August 16 | 10 AM - Noon ET

Join COL in controlling invasive shrubs and be one of the first people to see one of our newest properties! No equipment or experience is required to participate. Just wear sturdy shoes and weather-appropriate clothing.

September Kayak & Brews

September 11 | 2:00 - 5:00 PM ET | Galien River Marsh & Ghost Isle Brewery

See additional details on page 11.

Events and Programs require pre-registration.

Stewardship Days: RSVP to Stewardship Manager Dan Engel at dengel@chikamingopenlands.org or 269-405-1006.

All other Programs & Events: Contact our Outreach Intern Emily at esarra@chikamingopenlands.org

To view the full events calendar, visit chikamingopenlands.org/events.

2025 SUMMER EVENTS & STEWARDSHIP DAYS

Stewardship Day: Burns Prairie Preserve

Sat. September 13 | 10 AM - Noon ET

Support ongoing habitat restoration by collecting and redistributing seed to increase wildflower diversity. No equipment or experience is required to participate. Just wear sturdy shoes and weather-appropriate clothing.



Mushroom Hike with Charlie Havens

Fri. Sept. 26 | 10 AM ET | Location TBD

Join mushroom enthusiast, Charlie Havens, for a beginner mushroom hike including identification and safety tips.

BOARD MEMBER FEATURE



Ellen S. Alberding joined Chikaming Open Lands' Board of Directors in early 2025. She recently retired as the President and CEO of the Joyce Foundation after 34 years. Under her leadership, the Joyce Foundation gained national prominence with a grant portfolio rooted in the core belief that communities are stronger when they share benefits

broadly. Ellen is also a member of the Board of Trustees at Loyola University Chicago. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Brown University and an MBA from Northwestern University. In her spare time, Ellen enjoys cycling and hiking—activities that led her to discover Chikaming Open Lands while on a hike with fellow COL board member Mary K. Kelly.

Join COL and Ghost Isle Brewery for scenic guided paddles through the Galien River Marsh!



Participants will meet at the New Buffalo Boat Launch to launch. Afterwards, join us at Ghost Isle Brewery to enjoy discounted food & drinks with prime views of the Galien River! Participants must be 18 or older and have previous kayaking experience.

Registration is required. COL will have a limited number of kayaks available for participants to use at no cost. Due to our limited number of kayaks, participants who have their own paddlecraft are encouraged to bring them.

Contact our Education & Outreach Coordinator Grace at gball@chikamingopenlands.org for registration information.

Kayak & Brews: Pride Paddle

June 6 | 2:00 - 5:00 PM ET

Registration opens May 16th at 10am ET

Come dressed in your best rainbow gear and paint the Galien with pride! As part of Harbor Country Pride, this event is created to celebrate and support the LGBTQ+ community and is open to all—including allies and friends.

July Kayak & Brews

July 21 | 2:00 - 5:00 PM ET

Registration opens July 6th at 10am ET

September Kayak & Brews

September 11 | 2:00 - 5:00 PM ET

Registration opens August 11th at 10 AM ET



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