

HISTORY NOTE: For four decades, Wilderness Inquiry has made outdoors accessible

by Access Press Staff // February 9th, 2019

Wilderness Inquiry's mission is to connect people from all walks of life to the natural world through shared outdoor adventures. Through the medium of outdoor adventure travel, the nonprofit inspires personal growth, enhanced awareness of the environment and community integration. Wilderness Inquiry wraps up its 40th year of service in May 2019, so during this anniversary year it's time to look back at four decades of new possibilities and opportunity

In 1974, Bill Simpson, Tom Rasmussen and Greg Lais took a group of 14-year-old students on a winter camping trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. That started regular student trips and inspired Lais and four other friends to spend a month in the wilderness as a St. John's University J-term project.

The name "Wilderness Inquiry" was eventually adopted. It explains that the experiences are about education and the wilderness. People with disabilities were included as a result over a controversy over Boundary Waters management and whether motorized transport should be used there. In 1977 then-Sen. Wendell Anderson (D-Minnesota) was made the statement that "the handicapped, elderly and women" would never be able to enjoy the area without the use of motors.

At the time, Lais' sister Mary worked for what was then the Minnesota State Council on Disability. She called her brother to suggest that they give it a try and contradict Anderson.

In an effort to demonstrate that anyone can enjoy the wilderness on its own terms, Lais and college pal Paul Schurke organized a trip to the Boundary Waters in 1977. Deaf people and people using wheelchairs were among the group. That trip opened new possibilities and changed the lives of everyone involved. As Lais recalled:

"I'll never forget watching Margot Imdieke crawl across a portage trail dragging her wheelchair to prove to herself that she could do it. It blew me away, and put my issues and worries in perspective. I learned then to keep an open mind and never say never!"

Wilderness Inquiry was formally incorporated in 1978, with help from Greg and Mary's father, Don Lais. Several programs began under the Wilderness Inquiry umbrella, including programs to provide outdoor experiences for youth and adults with cognitive and physical disabilities.

Over the years Wilderness Inquiry built a reputation for inclusive outdoor adventures and other trips around the world. It has grown from a Minneapolis garage to its own office and warehouse, and a base camp at Little Sand Bay near the Apostle Islands. Since the beginning, Wilderness Inquiry has served almost 400,000 people on canoe, kayak, rafting, hiking, dogsled, ski, horse-pack and safari adventures throughout North America and the world.

Many things have changed since three friends and a group of students made that first trip to in the Boundary Waters together, but the spirit, care and sense of adventure continues throughout

Wilderness Inquiry programs to this day—whether in Alaska, East Africa or the Bronx. Learn more about Wilderness Inquiry at www.wildernessinquiry.org

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.