

Hi Folks, Darin Holden here, Executive director of Camp Anokijig. First, I'd like to welcome you to 2026! I'd like to take just 15 minutes of your time here today to talk a little bit about Anokijig history and a lot about Anokijig's future. Many of you know that summer 2025 was Anokijig's 100th season and 2026 is Anokijig's anniversary year. Back in 1926, our founder Ray Vance brought together a team of Racine Wisconsin area volunteer leaders to create this great place we call Anokijig. They envisioned a place where Racine kids could build independence, self-esteem, life skills, and character, by spending time in the woods having outrageous fun with Great role models!

I'm happy to report they accomplished their goal. For 79 years the Racine YMCA oversaw this gem of a facility that served thousands of summer camp kids, summer camp staff, school kids, and families. Thousands of life-changing experiences. Maybe you or your child had one or more of those experiences. Throughout that time frame while serving all those people Anokijig had good years and bad. Anokijig and the Racine YMCA struggled through the great depression, a world war, epidemics, and financial challenges. But we always came through because of the passion and dedication of our staff, volunteers, and donors.

In the summer of 2005, the Racine Y was not doing well financially, and it was determined that building a new facility outside of the downtown area, in the expanding "suburbs" of Racine could be the answer to their woes. The decision was made to fund that proposed new 8-million-dollar facility by selling Anokijig.

Luckily, a group of dedicated supporters had seen the handwriting on the wall just a year or two prior and had researched how to become a 501c3 independent not for profit organization. When the announcement was made in August of 2005 that Anokijig was for sale, that group sprang into action. They officially became The Friends of Camp Anokijig Inc and started to raise funds to put in a bid to buy the camp. You see, the Y decided to put the camp on the open market and entertain bids from any and all suitors. In the bid group were private home developers, golf course developers, resort developers, and the Friends. With a deadline of just 90 days after the announcement, any bids offered would be considered. 90 days to Save Anokijig. The facility that had affected so many lives.

It was a tense time at Anokijig. The Y was expecting to get bids of up to 8 million dollars. The Save camp.com website started to raise donations. The Anokijig faithful came out of the woodwork. There were numerous newspaper editorials chastising the Y for putting Anokijig up for sale, there were bake sales, lost and found rummage sales, a public Rally and even a family camper on a roof in Milwaukee in a sasquatch suit waving to the news helicopters, even a rock band did concert fundraiser. In short, the Anokijig faithful did all they could to convince anyone that they could, that Anokijig should remain a camp, and nothing else. One special alumni Phil Binks heard of a race enthusiast at Road America that had a foundation that helped non-profit organizations with low interest loans. Phil knocked on that funder's trailer doors at the track and said, "there is a camp just across the lake that needs your help". After listening to Phil's appeal, the funder felt his passion and helped fund the effort with a 2-million-dollar loan. In Just 90 days after the announcement was made that Anokijig was in jeopardy, the Anokijig faithful had raised approximately \$400k in donations. Those funds as well as a \$2M loan from the Negaunee Foundation, \$500k loan from the Y, and a \$3M bank loan guaranteed by our new board president Jim McIlvaine allowed The Friends of Camp Anokijig Inc to put in a \$5.5M bid. In the end, our bid was accepted. We won. Of note though, I was told, that there was a competing bid that was higher but was removed before the deadline... because the bidder saw all the passion that our supporters showed toward Anokijig and its mission, and they didn't want to be a part of ending Anokijig. In the end, no matter how you look at it, it was the passion that Anokijig instilled in our supporters, the passion that so many of you showed, that actually kept Anokijig alive.

That was 20yrs ago this year. And I am happy to report that Anokijig not only stayed alive. it thrived. Over those twenty years our camper numbers more than doubled, we diligently paid off \$4.8 million in loans plus interest. At the same time with great financial leadership nearly \$9 million in additions, repairs, and improvements were seen at camp, which upgraded our service and increased our capacities. And that doesn't count the recent addition of Centennial lodge. And (except for a short stint during the covid shorten year of 2020) Anokijig's budget has been in the black the whole time. I'm told by folks in the non-profit world that those are incredible numbers. That again shows that there is incredible support for Anokijig and its mission. We should all be proud.

So why have I taken your time to tell you this history? Because we are at another historic time at Anokijig now. Recently as I talked to some of those folks that helped the "save camp" effort 20yrs ago, I was asked "so do we own Anokijig now" is it actually safe and

saved. Many of those that have watched the building of Centennial Lodge over the last two years have speculated and assumed that to get that done we just added on to that original loan. Well, that is not the case. Which brings us to the moral of this little message.

I'm not sure how often people hear this phrase in our digital world now, but those of my and older generations surely remember the elation of their family when they were able to "burn the note". You see, in the old days you signed a piece of paper called a note with the bank when you bought your house. That note said if you didn't pay, they take your house. Then after maybe 30 years of mortgage payments, when it was paid off, they returned that note marked paid. That meant it was actually yours, you owned it and no bank could take it from you. So, you celebrated by actually burning that note. Having a great celebration and making it go away.

Well in honor of our 100th anniversary as Anokijig and our 20th anniversary as the friends of Anokijig how fitting would be that at our August 22nd, 2026, alumni weekend anniversary celebration we build a campfire and "burn the note". In August 2026 the paperwork says we'll have \$750,000 left to pay on that original note. Today I'm laying down the challenge to any and all of those that know and love Anokijig, that have been affected by an Anokijig experience, or seen someone affect by an Anokijig experience to dig deep and help us raise that \$750,000. Yes, that is a big challenge but recall in 2005 that in just 90 days a much smaller amount of people raised nearly \$400K. We have twice as long to raise less than twice as much. It is doable. In fact, we already have a donor that has pledged to match the first \$50k that comes in. We currently spend \$195K each year on that note. Imagine what improvements and services we could do every year that we don't have that payment.

So here is the plan. We need that grass roots group and several more like it to start calling and messaging all their friends that love and support Anokijig or might support Anokijig and what it does. Often, I've heard people mention that our fundraising team only cares about big donations. That's not true, here is a chance for everyone to get involved, give till it stings. Whether that's \$50 thousand or \$5000, \$100, or \$25. It will all help.

I know that many people just don't know where to start in an effort like this. So, we're going to help make that easier too.

On our website we have a page under the “donate here” menu called Burn the note. On that page you can donate directly with a credit card, Venmo, or ach straight from your bank for a one time or a recurring donation. You can make a pledge and send a check, arrange a stock transfer, or a minimum distribution from your retirement fund. In short, just about any way possible you can donate is available.

When it comes to spreading the news to your friends you could just forward a copy of this email and encourage them to do the same. However, when it comes to your friends maybe a letter or email that comes directly from you would be more convincing. We can help there also. On the web page you will find links to templates of letters that you can copy, personalize and send out to your camp friends or others. There are also sample social media posts. In fact, there is even a process to make your own personalized website that people can donate through called Just Giving. Don't forget there are lots of companies that do offer matching donations for their employees also. We want to make it very easy for you to be very productive. I mentioned this idea to a couple alumni a short time ago and they have got the ball rolling. One that sent out about 50 letters to their old camp friends has already resulted in over \$1500 coming in over a very short time.

So, the challenge is on. For those that have said “I'd be happy to help but have never been asked” We're asking!

If you have any ideas to pass on that would help or if you would like help with a letter, if you need me to visit someone that might help, just let me know. It is all of our jobs to steward this incredible place into its next century and beyond so it can keep affecting more and more lives, for years to come.

So come join me, to make this happen. Let's write the final chapter, put a last period on that story of the “saving of Anokijig”. I can't wait to say that final RIC Tic with you at the campfire in August where we burn that note!