



Camp Manitou: A Place to Find Your Place

The Ben Hoffmeister & John Cranford Story

Camp Manitou teaches how important it is, not only to have great friends, but also to maintain long-lasting relationships with people. It taught Ben Hoffmeister & John Cranford that it feels good to have people whom you can love, care about, and count on. All of that started at Camp Manitou 26 years ago.

Tucked away in the northwoods of Wisconsin, Camp Manitou sits along beautiful Long Lake in New Auburn. For the past 100 years, it has been a unifier, a place to form connections, to make music, and discover confidence. It has shaped generations of children, not only in the Chippewa Valley but across the United States.

"Camp Manitou is this sacred, magical place. There is no other place in the entire world that has that same vibe. The land, the physical attributes of this beautiful lake, this amazing waterfront, this epic forest and the trees. But its also the core values of the camp, what it stands for, those values were instilled in all of us," John shared.

John & Ben met at Camp Manitou and their friendship has spanned over 26 years. "Camp has always been a safe place to go up to a stranger and become friends," Ben shared, "you could show up at camp and not know anybody, and the next year, come back to camp with the friends you made the year before."

"Eventually, you don't even have to ask your friends what week they are going to camp because you know that no matter if you go at the same time as they do, or not, you are going to connect with people and make lasting friendships," John added.

When kids disconnect from the outside distractions of day-to-day life and have the opportunity to be present with kids their own age, going through similar things in life, it allows them to connect on a level where true-lasting friendships can be made.

These friendships don't just remain at Camp Manitou. "I can be in all parts of the United States and so many people from Camp come out and support us," John spoke of when his band tours across the US. "All these people I met at camp 26 years ago are still there for me and still a support system for me, just because of Camp Manitou. The bond you make there is just different, you don't make that type of connection through school, or anywhere else, really," John continued.

Ben shared, "I feel super lucky to have had the opportunity to go to Camp and form these long-lasting friendships - it's rare. It is really crazy to think that our core group that we met in the summer of 1996 has stayed as tight as we have. We genuinely care about what is going on in each other's lives and make an effort to see each other still to this day."

Ben was never able to get away from Camp. It was, and still remains, a very important part of his life. Ben works at Camp Manitou and gets to witness the magic of camp nearly 30 years after attending as a camper himself. "I see my core friend group I met at camp in these young kids attending camp now. It's cool to see the younger generations going to Camp and doing their thing. When kids are at Camp it really is a place, they want to be; they just want to be kids, make connections, and make memories," Ben explained.

It doesn't take long for campers to get comfortable at camp. "It's fun to be there and just be weird. Kids can just be themselves and no one is going to make fun of you," John shared. Ben added, "I never would have thought that as a 14-year-old, that camp would have had such a lasting impact on our lives."

"I wish every 13-year-old could go to camp - at school, you have cliques, clubs, teams; at camp, it doesn't matter who you are - everyone is there to just have fun. Camp is a unifier," John said. "At camp, I would see people who weren't like me but it didn't matter, we both had the same goal: to have fun at camp." Camp brings kids together that probably wouldn't have connected in school. Camp Manitou provides kids with the opportunity to step out of their shell, try new things, connect with new people, and grow a confidence that will stay with them as they get older.

"I was pretty weird - you look at pictures from when I attended camp and see how differently we are dressed - we remain close but have all taken different paths in life and it's really cool to see what we all have become," John expressed.

Ben added, "Camp gives you the confidence to not only be yourself, but to find your place."

At camp, it doesn't matter if you aren't great at something. All of the regular life stressors that get put on a young person, all of that goes out the window once you step foot on that property. "No one is going to judge you at camp and that's huge. We are all just there to laugh, have fun, and make memories," John shared. "Kids think they are under the microscope to live up to certain standard, but, when they are at camp, they develop confidence to just be themselves and connect with other kids."

John & Ben's connection began at camp, but they soon realized they shared many common hobbies and talents. While at camp, John & Ben formed a band and wrote their first song together at Camp Manitou. Fast forward to 2021, Ben & John recorded an entire album at Camp Manitou, HWY 40. "Bands were formed, friendships were formed; it really is a magical place," Ben added.

John goes back to visit camp often. "I am so thankful that the camp is still there. It was there when I was 13 and still here when I am 39. I am fortunate to be able to come back and visit. This place that has had such an impact, so many memories have been made, and I am fortunate to have the opportunity to still visit that space and still have it in my life."

People can leave a legacy at Camp Manitou, but the legacy that camp leaves on people is even greater. Camp instills a sense of confidence in campers, encouraging them to embrace challenges, make connections, and believe in their abilities. Campers are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones, try new activities, and discover hidden talents. The spirit of Camp Manitou lives on in the hearts of all who have experienced camp, shaping them into more confident, empathetic, and creative individuals.

YMCA OF THE CHIPPEWA VALLEY