

A LOCAL LEGEND

Catching up with “Kup”

BY VALERIE HARDY

Meeting with Will Kupisch at Panera was like sitting with a celebrity. Every few minutes someone would come up to greet him with a hello, handshake, or hug.

One of these people was Carey Greene, a 1993 Downers Grove North High School graduate, who lives in New Hampshire but was in town visiting her mother. She had Mr. Kupisch (“Kup,” as he is more commonly and affectionately known) as her guidance counselor. “She’d come into his office crying about something, and he’d get out his guitar,” Greene’s mother, Eileen Leathers, reminisced about how Kup helped support Greene during her teen years.

TEACHER, COUNSELOR, & COACH

During Kup’s career at North High School, which spanned five different decades (1978–2011), he interfaced with thousands of students: in the classroom, in the counseling office, on the track, or on the field. He started his career at DGN fresh out of college, a self-described “young pup who didn’t know anything,” just grateful to have gotten a job. “I didn’t realize the magnitude of the institution then,” Kup said of North High.

However, he quickly came to realize his good fortune in having been hired at a school where “people care and go the extra,” he said. “North High School knocked it out of the park, and it was a privilege to be part of that.”



KUP, ALONG WITH NEWS PERSONALITY JON HANSEN, EMCEES THE ANNUAL THANKSGIVING MORNING RACE (FORMERLY THE BONFIELD EXPRESS, NOW THE GROVE EXPRESS) IN DOWNTOWN DOWNERS GROVE.

Kup was a history and physical education teacher before becoming a school counselor, a position he held for the majority of his career. “You don’t placate them,” Kup explained of his approach to counseling students. “You tell them the truth, so they can move on, not stay stuck.”

His students responded to his nurturing yet direct style, in a counseling capacity and in a coaching one. “Coach Kup” worked with North’s football team for a few years before

shifting his focus to cross country and track and field.

“Coaching just augmented my position as a person and as a guidance counselor in the building,” Kup said. “You get to know people.”

And people are what matter most to Kup; not just the smartest, strongest, or fastest ones, but “every kid.” Kup explained that regardless of his runners’ times or talents, “they were all special, and if they didn’t feel the love from me, then I failed.”



THE KUPISCH FAMILY IS ONE THAT ORIENTS AROUND EDUCATION, SERVICE, AND LOVE.



KUP RECONNECTS WITH HIS FORMER COUNSELEE FROM DGN, CARY GREENE, CLASS OF '93.

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS

Although Kup retired more than a decade ago, he still spreads wisdom and love within and beyond the DGN community. He comes back as a guest coach and motivational speaker for North's cross country team, proud to support his successor, Coach John Sipple, of whom he feels like "a proud parent for what he's done with the program," he said.

Kup was also integral in getting Downers Grove's annual Bonfield Express Thanksgiving Day 5K (now the Grove Express) up and running and may be considered the face of the race, emceeing from the starting line. "Quite the man, Mr. Bonfield," Kup said, of his former District 99 colleague for whom the race was initially named, and quite the event. Kup explained how rewarding it has been to see each year's race proceeds result in a "scholarship that turned heads, a scholarship based on character, not grades."

Kup also helps teens and adults from Chicago and other areas of the state build character and an appreciation of nature in his role as a director at the Glenhagen Farm Retreat, a non-profit camp in Princeton, Illinois (see

"North High School knocked it out of the park, and it was a privilege to be part of that."

- WILL KUPISCH, ABOUT HIS THREE DECADES TEACHING, COUNSELING, AND COACHING AT DGN

companion story). He is also a chaplain of the Downers Grove Police Department, using his counseling skills to offer support in times of crisis. "I pray before I go, not knowing what I'm parachuting into," Kup said about his response when a situation necessitates a chaplain. "I just pray I can be of some benefit."

A man of deep faith, Kup also leads the weekly local bible study group of which he has been a participant for 30 years. He also speaks at funerals, baptisms, and weddings. In fact, he has officiated 80 weddings, "half of them, probably, of former students," he said.

THE KUPISCH FAMILY

When Kup commits to officiating a wedding, he often tells the couple, "I'm going to marry you as if I'm marrying my son or my daughter."

He is referring to his two children – Andrew Kupisch (a fifth grade teacher at Downers Grove's Henry Puffer Elementary School) and

Megan Klucharik (a former first grade teacher who is now on the administrative staff for the Glenhagen Farm Retreat) – who both attended DGN. "I had my own kids as my counselees," Kup said, and got a front row seat to their band performances and track and cross country meets. "I got to see them a lot," he said about his children. "I'm not sure if I would have coached if I was at another high school," because that would have meant missing out on many of his own kids' events.

Coaching most of the year took up a lot of Kup's time, and he credits his wife, Cathy, for supporting him and their family through those many busy seasons. Cathy – who grew up in Downers Grove and whose father started the local Bob Carter's Auto Body shop – was also an educator. Both now retired, Kup and Cathy enjoy spending time with their family, including five grandchildren who they often babysit.

Kup considers his family the greatest members of his team: "If people are saying anything about me, it's really about us. It couldn't have happened without us." ■

GREAT ESCAPE

Glenhagen Farm Retreat offers youth and adults a rich camp experience right here in Illinois

This summer, it will be a full family affair for the Kupisches at Glenhagen Farm Retreat. Kup will continue to serve as the primary director, and his son, Andrew Kupisch, will be joining the directorial staff as well. Kup's daughter, Megan Klucharik, will continue her administrative role for the camp, and his wife, Cathy, is sure to be around volunteering, too.

Glenhagen Farm Retreat is located in Princeton, Illinois (a 100-minute drive from Downers Grove or two-hour train ride from Chicago) on the 65 acres of recreational land owned by the camp's founders, longtime Downers Grove residents Andy Tecson and Nancy Hagen. Opened in 2018, the camp's name is in homage to Hagen's late father, Glen Hagen, who - along with her late mother - believed "opportunities should exist for everyone, and the outdoors should be preserved," Hagen explained.

Accordingly, the camp's theme is "Care for the Earth," Hagen said, and it operates as a nonprofit organization, offering grants to groups serving those without resources to pay. These financial subsidies cover transportation,

food, and other costs associated with attending the camp.

However, the camp welcomes groups with the means to pay their own way as well. When not need-based, organizations visiting Glenhagen Farm Retreat will work with the camp to appropriately identify fees on a sliding scale, Tecson explained.

Opened May through October, the camp typically serves groups of 10-40 for up to four-day stays. Only one group attends the camp at a time, so it is a very private experience, and they can set the itinerary that best serves their needs. "It's very a la carte, choose your own adventure," Klucharik explained.

As for supplies, most items are provided by the camp, including tents and thick sleeping pads. When a group of middle school boys from Catalyst Circle Rock Academy on the west side of Chicago attended the camp last summer, setting up the tents was one of their favorite activities. "It was a real bonding moment," said the group's leader, Charles Myers.

Myers also noted that, living in the city, where there is typically a lot of street noise, the Catalyst Circle Rock group also "benefited from it being completely quiet" at the camp. His students appreciated the nature and wildlife, "fresh air, and great sleep they got" while at camp, and "it was so great," Myers said,

students keep asking to go again this year and stay longer.

The camp has a creek running through it, and participants enjoy exploring that, hiking, birdwatching ("there are at least 50 different species of birds," Hagen said), and learning about sustainable energy in action (the camp has solar panels to produce its own electricity, a geothermal unit on the farm, and wind turbines are visible in the distance).

"It is intentional that we don't have archery, canoeing, [or the like]," Tecson said. "The whole point if you go camping is to get in touch with nature. To decompress."

That said, despite the camp's relative simplicity, there are plenty of opportunities for fun. The camp features trails to navigate, a fire pit, volleyball court, and there are plans to add a basketball court.

There is truly something for everyone at the camp, and - as Kup described - the experience is "transforming."

"We want it to be used!" Tecson said of the Glenhagen Farm Retreat and its amenities, encouraging anyone who knows of a group (school group, religious organization, youth group, after school program, grief group, sorority or fraternity, research group, or other nonprofit organizations) that might be interested in attending the camp to reach out. While "our sweet spot is middle school through college," Tecson noted, the camp is not age restricted.

For more information, visit www.glenhagenfarm.org or email glenhagenfarm@gmail.com.



CAMPERS FROM GARY COMER YOUTH CENTER OF CHICAGO SUCCESSFULLY SET UP THE TENTS PROVIDED BY GLENHAGEN FARM RETREAT DURING THEIR VISIT.