Suggested headline:

*Developing character, one camper at a time*

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

Ask anybody. Lake Geneva is stunning waterfront estates, world-class resorts and spas, top golf courses, high-end shops and fine dining.

Look closer. There’s more.

We’re talking about hidden gems with eye-popping lakefront access, catering to kids who need both experience and guidance in today’s complicated world.These intriguing spaces have been here for decades, tucked quietly away where youngsters can commune with the serenity of nature in ways that are both fun and spiritual.

We set out with a plan to visit and write about four youth camps along beautiful Geneva Lake. What we found is breathtaking, and more than one column could handle. This is the first of two, looking at our visits to the Norman B. Barr Camp in Williams Bay and the Covenant Harbor Camp and Retreat Center in Lake Geneva.

Eric Anderson was our guide at Covenant Harbor. He first experienced the space as a camper and has been on staff since 2003, the last four years as executive director. Covenant Harbor is owned by Covenant Evangelical Church, which has 110 congregations in its central conference. A sister camp, called Covenant Point, is in Iron River, Michigan.

The facility – located just off Hwy. 50 at the west edge of Lake Geneva – offers a variety of year-round camping experiences, from week-long programs to day camping to retreat experiences at its conference center. At any given time 300 kids are on campus, “and sometimes even more than that,” Eric explained, telling us at times the number including day campers and retreat visitors can reach 500.

One constant is that the camp strives to find and encourage young people to choose a positive, spiritual approach to life. While many of the campers come from Illinois – often the Chicago area – about 6,000 area kids join the programs annually, mostly as day campers.

Eric said recruitment “often targets kids from Chicago, kids that are identified through the public school system that could be future positive leaders for change in their community.”

Week-long camps operate in four age segments, from first-graders to high-schoolers. The grounds – about 50 acres – include sleeping facilities, playgrounds, rope-challenge courses, a massive gymnasium and activities center, dining facilities and, of course, extensive lakefront water programs. Covenant Harbor is religiously affiliated, so there’s a chapel and worship schedule that is non-denominational.

“Anyone is welcome to come here,” Eric said. “In fact a minority of the attendees that we have are coming here from Covenant churches.”

Originally, the property was privately owned and was called Snug Harbor, one of the most impressive residences along the lake. It was acquired in 1947. There are about 40 buildings on the property, including a few original structures. The site of the original mansion is set up as a tent-based worship center for nine weeks each summer, open to the public.

“After the tent service is over we open up all of the grounds so people can stick around until about 4 o’clock when the next round of campers come,” Eric said. “You can bring your own lunch, sit at the picnic tables, or buy a lunch from us up at the lodge, and then we open up the waterfront for a couple of hours.”

Covenant Harbor operates as a hybrid pay-scholarship model.

“We give away a lot of money in scholarships, well over $100,000 this year,” Eric told us. “In all of my 20-some years here there has never been a camper turned away because of their financial situation.”

(For more information go to the website: covenantharbor.org)

Next we visited the Norman B. Barr Camp in Williams Bay. Located near the George Williams College of Aurora University property, there’s quite a story behind this hidden rustic camp.

Norman Barr was a preacher with Olivet Presbyterian Church in the Chicago area, visiting a YMCA camp at Geneva Lake in the early 1900s. On a walk he discovered the current camp’s site, which was for sale. He persuaded his church to acquire the land to establish a camp in 1908.

Our host – Deedy French Payne – told us the land was purchased from a female doctor, Alice Bunker Stockham. The good doctor got in trouble, Deedy said, and “was sued for giving too much information to women about their bodies.” That sort of thing happened in America, back in those days, but the doctor’s misfortune turned into positive experiences for generations of young campers.

Deedy has seen four generations of her family experience the Barr camp and that’s not unusual. In fact, she said, “many families have been there two generations before that.”

The camp operates in a unique fashion. There are about 35 cottages on the four-acre site. These are occupied in the summer only – buildings are not insulated for winter – and families pay fees to stay. There’s also a lodge with limited public availability, located just feet from the lakefront.

The camp is financed through the fee structure, donations and the occasional government or charitable grant.

It’s all directed toward youth camps for kids which run throughout the summer, after school is out. Each weekly camp consists of 12 boys and 12 girls, who stay in dormitories. All expenses are paid for the campers.

There’s a park and playground, communal fire pit, bath houses and showers, a basketball court, a craft house often used for entertainment and watching movies. The centerpiece is the beautiful lakefront with facilities for swimming, kayaking and boating.

The Barr camp – which operates as a non-denominational facility – has a beautiful old chapel, and Tuesday services at 7:30 p.m. are open to the public.

The site, located along the famed lake path, is perhaps best known for its ice cream shop open to the public. The shop operates daily from 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m.

The Barr facility is also offering weekend retreat opportunities.

“”We have room for more weekend retreaters,” Deedy said. “It’s just a matter of getting people up here to see the facilities and getting organized.”

(For more information go the website: normanbarrcamp.org)

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. His wife, Stephanie Klett, is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*