

1989- 2016 – New Horizons Un-Limited Honors Anthonette Gilpatrick, Accessibility Coordinator Facilities and Lands, on her retirement from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

In the summer of 2016, Anthonette Gilpatrick, Accessibility Coordinator, planned and hosted a 25 year reunion of a very special DNR event. With 80 people attending, the reunion celebrated the contributions of the many volunteers who built the first Accessible Camping Cabin in the Wisconsin State Parks at Mirror Lake in 1991. The accessible features of the cabin were designed by the then, newly appointed, Anthonette and a cabin committee of Wisconsin citizens with disabilities in 1989. This was just before the important legislation, ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), which set standards for accessible spaces passed by Congress in 1990.

Anthonette is proud to point out the pre ADA accessible design standards and features of this early cabin design group have continued to be included with each subsequent Wisconsin accessible cabin (7 more) built. This is the passion of Anthonette Gilpatrick, always training, always advocating, and a huge contributor to why the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has been a leader in accessible recreational opportunities in the United States.

New Horizons Un-Limited honors Anthonette Gilpatrick in her retirement as Accessibility Coordinator for the Wisconsin (DNR) for her many accomplishments of removing barriers and creating access for thousands of people with disabilities to enjoy the Wisconsin State Parks for 27 years and plans for well into the future, especially her role to bring the Accessible Cabins to the state park campgrounds.

Julie Amakobe, a DNR's Facilities Management Officer, has worked on capital development projects including the cabins and other accessible projects with Anthonette. Julie wrote, "Anthonette has contributed endless hours to the Department of Natural Resources helping to make recreational opportunities more accessible to people with disabilities. She has contributed so much, that it is hard to summarize."

In 1989, Anthonette Gilpatrick began her career with the DNR as the first Accessibility Coordinator in the Bureau of Parks and Recreation where she worked until the reorganization within the DNR, and was moved to the Office of Diversity Affairs to work on ADA Title I- Employment and continue with ADA Title II program & facility issues for the DNR. After a number of years she was moved to Facilities & Lands and continued her work with ADA program and facility issues for all DNR programs. In 2000 she moved to the South Central Region (SCR) of the DNR to work on accessibility in the south central part of the state and was named Capital Development Coordinator working on budget and construction projects for DNR-SCR. She spent her final four years as full time Accessibility Coordinator back in Facilities and Lands working with all DNR programs on ADA Title I & II.

Anthonette explains, "It is hard to believe that I was at the DNR for 27 years and worked at an Independent Living Center for people with disabilities for 11 years prior. 38 years of working with people with disabilities!! I was blessed with the many advocates with disabilities who mentored me along the way."

Kayleen Brereton was one of those mentors and encouraged Anthonette to take the position with the DNR when it came up in 1989. Kayleen was an accessibility activist on the board of the Madison ILC (Independent Living Center for people with disabilities where Anthonette had worked). Kayleen was an avid camper, used a wheelchair, and she had been a consultant for the DNR offering accessibility suggestions for the Wisconsin State Parks.

It may be hard to imagine accessibility prior to the ADA, and as Anthonette has pointed out, the ADA was able to establish building standards, but when it comes to the outdoors, it is so much more difficult to create accessibility in the natural environment. Can one imagine trying to access a campsite of complete mud in one's wheelchair, an outhouse with pit toilets or scale a rocky climb of the kettle moraine of Wisconsin in one's wheel chair? Can one imagine what it might be like to have to leave one's power wheelchair at the campground shower facility to charge for the evening?

It was a busy first year on the job for Anthonette, in 1989, pre-ADA, the Bureau of Parks conducted an accessibility audit to identify barriers within the state parks which included everything from visitor entrance stations, parking lots, campsites, restrooms, picnic areas, etc. From the beginning, however, the DNR checklist goal of "Open the Outdoors" was to go far beyond improving the facilities' accessibility for people with disabilities. How could people with varying challenges with mobility and other disabilities enjoy the outdoors?

She said one goal was to make information on accessibility for individual parks easily available, so that "a person with a disability can come into a park, go into the park entrance station, talk to ... the staff there, and get information on where in the park they can visit." This focus on not only creating accessibility, but welcoming people with disabilities, is what has made Wisconsin a leader in accessibility.

"For many people, getting outdoors to enjoy nature and wildlife is something that they can take for granted. For people who are living with disabilities, there can be a lot of obstacles to having those same experiences." Anthonette said that the initiative to make the outdoors more accessible started with the question: "Where are the barriers, and what can we do to eliminate them?"

Anthonette found that the park property managers were not opposed to making their facilities accessible; they just did not have the resources in their budgets to make renovations. It became clear that the first order of business was to develop a budget to start to remove the barriers in phases. In addition, help select the vital accessibility projects for the state parks, develop capital budgets and then get the projects through the funding process.

In addition, shortly after she was hired, a philanthropic volunteer group, the Telephone Pioneers of America (TPA) called the Bureau Director and asked if there were some projects that they could be involved with to help the park system achieve their goals.

Anthonette brainstormed with Kayleen to come up with a list of projects geared at making the parks more accessible for people with disabilities. One of the ideas was Kayleen's dream. to

create an accessible cabin for people with disabilities who could not use the traditional campground facilities; she described a wooden tent.

They gave the TPA a list of ten ideas, everything from printing 50,000 accessibility brochures, an accessible playground, improving a trail at Devil's Lake and Kayleen's vision of an accessible cabin in a state park campground. "I began the Accessibility Coordinator job in the DNR Bureau of Parks in May, 1989 and volunteered in June to meet the Telephone Pioneers of America and present a list of projects to create accessibility for people with disabilities in Wisconsin's beautiful state parks." The TPA did not hesitate after Anthonette presented the list and commenced to begin a partnership with the Wisconsin DNR that included all ten ideas!

For the accessible cabin project, she was the DNR staff member of the first Cabin Committee. "We wanted it to be on the campground with all the other campers," Anthonette said. This Committee established priorities for the Cabin Project, set procedures for making reservations, developed special cabin features, and listed preferred locations, and more.

Once the TPA chose the construction of the "Accessible Cabin in the Woods" project as its priority, Anthonette, along with the Pioneers volunteered numerous hours constructing the first cabin at Mirror Lake State Park in 1991. They supplied the materials and volunteer labor. "I still find it hard to believe that they donated all the labor and raised money to construct the 1st three accessible cabins. It really does "take a village" to make things like this happen."

In her various positions with the DNR, Anthonette continued to be an integral part of designing or promoting the additional five (eight in total) wheelchair accessible cabins located throughout the State Parks, Forests, or Recreational Areas. Who would have thought that the first cabin at Mirror Lake was the beginning of a very popular program to be taken up by the people of Wisconsin with countless volunteer hours and donations of material and talent that allows thousands of people to gain access to enjoy the outdoors?

Anthonette has often spoken to other state park directors promoting the accessible cabins to be built in their states. In the 1990's Anthonette made a presentation about Wisconsin accessible cabin's initiative at a conference of the National Association of State Park Directors. She has assisted in writing several articles on accessible cabins and other accessible activities offered in Wisconsin's State Parks, Wildlife Areas, Recreational Areas and other State Properties. She has included descriptions for accessible fishing piers, adaptive kayaks, beach trails, beach wheel chairs, accessible trails, cross country sit skis, and hunting and wildlife blinds and provided this information in Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Natural Resource, and New Mobility magazines, and Options for Independent Living articles, Discover Wisconsin Media Network video episode and on Wisconsin Public Radio. Anthonette has also volunteered to promote accessibility by representing the DNR at informational booths at various festivities and locations.

"Anthonette has served as Technical Advisor to the DNR's Disability Advisory Council (DAC) starting in October 1991 until December 2016. She has contributed to legislation that allows persons with mobility disabilities to shoot from a vehicle (Class B permit); persons with visual disabilities to hunt with an assistant (Class C), and allowing persons with amputations or permanent loss of function of arm(s) to use adaptive devices on a firearms (Class D permit).

Anthonette was also instrumental in securing legislation that allows the hearing impaired to use electronic calls for turkey hunting.” “Thanks to Anthonette, the Wisconsin DNR has been a leader in accessible recreational opportunities and advancing new options and will continue to do so.”

The following is narrative from Julie Amakobe. You could say she and Anthonette literally worked in the trenches.

“I also helped Anthonette with several projects when she took measurements for renovation projects and new construction projects. I would take the notes while she measured. She would measure pit and flush toilets, shower stalls, slopes for trails, slopes for routes of travel, accessible parking spots, door widths, fishing pier guardrails, shooting range heights, viewing platforms, etc. The list goes on and on. If the project involved anything to do with accessibility, she would ensure the project was constructed correctly. If a project was already completed and was not accessible, she would ensure it was made accessible.”

This commitment to break down the barriers and allow access has been the force behind Anthonette Gilpatrick’s work for the DNR. It has been through her work literally in the trenches, her love for the beautiful Wisconsin State Parks and her commitment and determination that people of all abilities can not only enjoy the Wisconsin State Parks, but feel welcome there. She has given this extraordinary legacy of accessibility which includes new innovations and plans for the future.

It is our sincere hope we as Wisconsinites and all of us who enjoy the parks can continue to support accessibility far into the future.

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