

# Technology aids Freemans during year-long venture into BWCA

By KITTY MAYO

Right now, near the Canadian border, somewhere in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, class is in session.

Explorers and educators, Amy and Dave Freeman started a year-long camping expedition in the BWCAW this last September. With more than 100 days logged to date, they have brought 100,000 elementary and middle school students along with them.

That might sound like a lot of kids in tents, but the Freemans are using cutting edge technology to interact with the kids who are safe and warm in their respective classrooms around the country through their Wilderness Classroom website.

Voted by National Geographic as Explorers of the Year in 2014, outdoor adventures of extreme magnitude are what the Freemans do for a living, and their reason for doing it is education.

With the trip also intended to draw attention to the issue of potential environmental pollution to the BWCAW, the Freemans say they also want to teach children and adults about what they call a unique national treasure.

"Residents of the area can take for granted what's right outside our door. We want people to realize what a special place this is and enjoy it," said Amy.

The Freemans were camping at Wood Lake when they were interviewed by cell phone, accessing the sliver of cell phone coverage available in the Boundary Wa-

ters. Whenever possible, they use their cell phones to save on costs. The rest of the time they use a satellite terminal to get a connection to the outside world.

Small portable solar panels gather light while they are traveling, and they are set facing sunward when they are in camp. In the evenings they use that stored power to recharge their satellite phone, iPad, and camera batteries.

The satellite terminal is about 6 by 10 by 1 inch, and once charged connects them via satellite.

"Basically there's a satellite in orbit and we point the terminal at it, and that allows us to send and receive e-mails and small photos," Dave said.

While the Freemans are using high tech devices in the heart of the wilderness, it's not something they champion.

"People should unplug when they go out here. This technology is a tool like our ax or saw that we've used for over a decade to share from the wild," Amy said.

At the Wilderness Classroom website, an interactive map lets visitors see where they are as they move among lakes, in the summer canoeing and portaging, in the winter skiing and tobogganing.

Classes follow their blog posts, and teachers incorporate that information into curriculum. Students e-mail them questions, or vote in polls on decisions the Freemans have to make, like: "Should we heat our tent all night, or let the fire go out while we are sleeping?" Students weigh the cost of expending energy getting up in the middle of the night

to feed the fire, and spending more time gathering wood with the inconvenience of rising to an environment close to the same temperature as the out of doors.

One preschool class recently asked if they could send their drawings to camp, and some classes have put together care packages for them.

Volunteers bring in supplies about every 10 days, and as early as snow and ice conditions would allow, Frank Moe brought them a gift that they truly appreciate: three of his sled dogs, giving them the power necessary to move toboggans, pull them on skis, and much appreciated companionship. Acorn, the veteran of the group at age 12, was born in the back seat of a Chevy pickup on the way back from the Iditarod. Tina and Tank are siblings, and all the dogs have seen many expeditions and races.

When Moe, Cook County Commissioner and friend of the Freemans, visited on Jan. 2, he found them at their ease despite harsh conditions.

"Going to stop at their campsite on Newfound Lake was like stopping at your neighbor's down the road. It was like they were at home," Moe observed.

Moe sees the Boundary Waters and Lake Superior as imperative to the economic landscape of northeastern Minnesota. "Eighty percent of our economy depends on tourism. It's our economic lifeblood," he said.

While Moe does see a distinction between the economies of the Iron Range and the Arrowhead, he says they are in-

terdependent.

"Cook County is in almost as perilous a position as the Range right now. With the economic downturn, people don't travel," he said.

Sending podcasts out to WTIP 90.7FM radio station in Grand Marais is another way the Freemans are staying connected from the wilderness. Once a week, WTIP plays either a recorded podcast sent out on a SD card with volunteers, or sometimes they are live on the air through cell phone or satellite phone.

Beyond caring for the many things that a camp requires, the Freemans spend a lot of time writing, posting to the Wilderness Classroom, Facebook, Instagram, National Geographic, and blog for the Save the Boundary Waters website.

Both of them have been formally educated as teachers, spending the last decade splitting their year between Ely in the winter and Cook County, where they guide canoeists and host kayak trips during the summer.

A documentary of their experience is also in the works, with filming of their expedition by the video editor for Patagonia occurring periodically this year.

Windchills and below zero temperatures might sound like some of the most extreme outdoor challenges to face when living so far from civilization for 365 days. Not so for Amy Freeman, who says that once you learn how to dress in layers, it's really quite enjoyable.

"It's the bugs in July that'll be the hardest," she said.



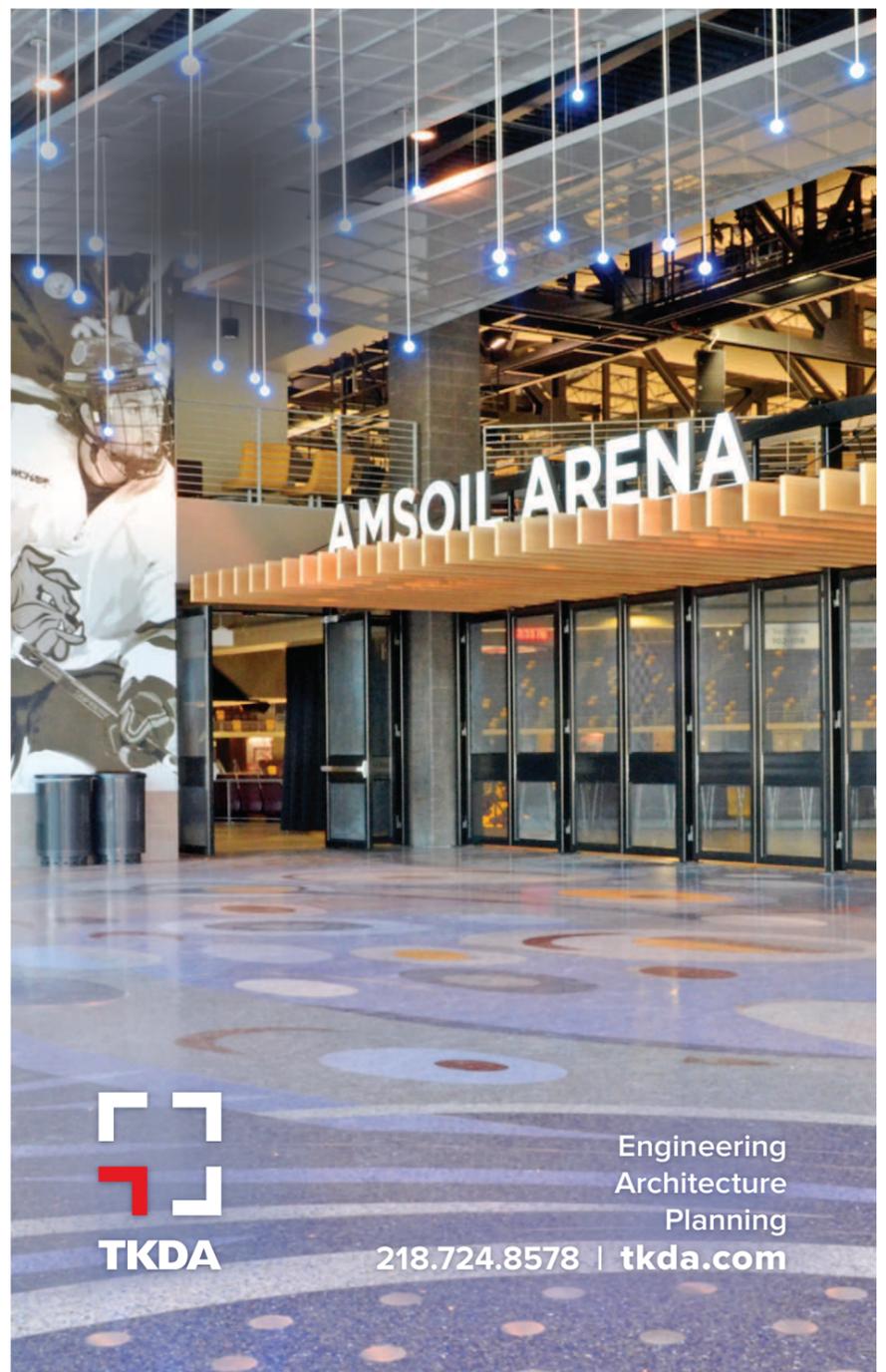
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