



Spring 2026 ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

The official newsletter of the John Island Camp Alumni and Friends of John Island

Vol. 23 No. 1

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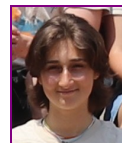
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Tells how the YMCA's new strategic plan may affect John Island Camp

.....and
SO MUCH MORE!!!!

You won't want to miss anything, so . . .

- Read it all now, **OR**
- Save the newsletter file to read when you have the time, **OR**
- Open a file just to keep your John Island Alumni Newsletters, **OR**
- Copy and save any parts you want to read later, **OR**
- Bookmark www.ymcaeo.ca/john-island-camp and then look under "alumni newsletters" for this and all previous newsletters.

There are 16 pages of total John Island Camp information - don't miss a word

Cover photo - dedication of the newly renovated John Island Camp Chapel (see page 13)

Summer is Coming

Cashel Moss
Camp Director



Hello John Island Friends and Family

As I head into my third summer as director, I've been reflecting on just how much change and growth we've experienced together over the past couple of years. It's an exciting time for John Island Camp, and I'm grateful to be part of it alongside such a dedicated and passionate community.

One of the most exciting developments has been the evolution of our leadership programming. Last summer marked the introduction of Greenway B, our three week leadership program and it exceeded all expectations. Building on that momentum, we are thrilled to welcome back Program Norquay as a five week experience. Not only is it returning as a core camp program, but it will also offer participants the opportunity to earn a high school credit. This is an incredible step forward in recognizing the depth and value of the camp experience.

We are also expanding our program offerings with the introduction of our new Challengers Program. This one week experience is designed for campers eager to dive into two of camp's most exciting activities—high ropes and sailing. By combining these high adventure elements into a focused program, we are creating a unique opportunity for challenge, growth and unforgettable fun.

On the facilities side, we are continuing to invest in our camp infrastructure. This spring we are hoping to add another ropes element, weather permitting. This will further enhance our adventure programming and give campers even more opportunities to push their limits in a supportive environment.

As we look ahead to the upcoming season, we are also experiencing an exciting evolution within our staff team. After nine years of dedication to John Island Camp, we are saying a heartfelt "thank you" to Bridget Spoel. Bridget has been an incredible leader, mentor and friend. She played a huge role in helping me find my footing when I first arrived. While we will miss her greatly, we are excited to see where her journey in camping takes her next.

At the same time, I am thrilled to share that new this year we will have two assistant directors' supporting camp operations. I am excited to welcome John To as one of our assistant directors. John brings a wealth of experience from camps across the country, including Camp Davern, YMCA Camp Elphinstone, YMCA Camp Chief Hector and YMCA Camp Pine Crest. I hope you will join me in giving John a warm welcome to the John Island community.

I am equally excited to announce that our very own Yanick Taillefer will be returning to John Island Camp as an assistant director. Yanick has been part of the camp community for many years, working his way up from maintenance staff to waterfront team lead and most recently program manager. His deep knowledge of camp and commitment to our community make him an incredible addition to the leadership team. I am so excited to have him join us in this role.

There is so much to look forward to this season and none of it would be possible without the continued support of our alumni, families and friends. Thank you for being such an important part of the John Island Story. I hope to see many of you back on the island this year.

Cashel



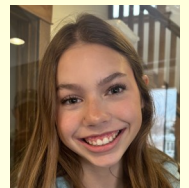
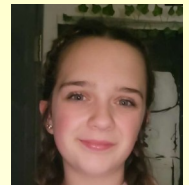
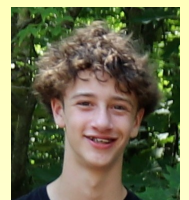
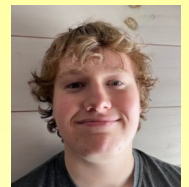
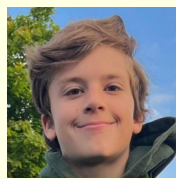
Alumni Leadership Bursary

Nine bursary awards have been granted to John Island Camp Leadership campers this year. Bursaries can be applied for by any registered camper in one of the John Island Camp Leadership Programs.

The awards are made possible due to donations received for the bursary fund by members of the John Island Camp Alumni. This year's awards will bring the number of bursary awards in the past three years since the program began to 18.

Bursary awards for this year have been awarded to Ellen Harrison (Greenway), Mallory Masse (Norquay), Veronica Warwick-Chong (Norquay), Jackson Jeffery (Norquay), Adam Young (Greenway), Aceline Xiao (Sr. Prospectors Leadership), Audrey Loughheed Greenway), Anderson Whittington (Norquay) and Jack Harmon (Norquay).

In total, \$6,750 was awarded this year as part of the JIC Alumni Leadership Program. Each applicant for a leadership bursary has presented an application for review to the Alumni Bursary Committee. The application consists of a 500 word essay, references and past camp experience.



Alumni Bursary Fund Needs Your Help

Including the bursaries awarded this year, the JIC Alumni Leadership Bursary program has awarded over \$11,000 .

In order to keep the fund with sufficient funds, your help is needed. To donate to the fund scroll down to Alumni Bursary fund on this page:

[YMCA Donate Page – YMCA of Northeastern Ontario](#)



John Island Camp FLASHBACK!

Norquay Campers Paint a New Camp Sign

As a special Norquay project, this illustrative group took the design used for the camp t-shirt and proceeded to paint a 8 X 4 ft. camp sign which was placed on the camp aide of the bridge at camp.

Looking Ahead



By Kendra Maclsaac

Kendra Maclsaac
YMCA of Northeastern Ontario
Vice President of Health and Wellness

We are pleased to share some exciting updates with our John Island alumni community as we close an important chapter of renewal and look ahead to the future with purpose and optimism.

Thanks to the generous support of the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), we have successfully completed a significant scope of capital and infrastructure work that strengthens the safety, reliability, and overall experience on the island. This work included the installation of a new generator to ensure dependable power, essential dining hall repairs, critical boat repairs, and a variety of other improvements that help keep John Island operating smoothly and safely. These investments are foundational to our ability to deliver meaningful, high quality camp experiences and to steward the island responsibly.

While we celebrate the completion of this important work, we also recognize that John Island is always evolving—and that continued care and reinvestment are essential. With that in mind, we have once again applied for OTF funding to support the next phase of improvements. This ongoing effort reflects our commitment to planning ahead, caring deeply for the island, and ensuring that future generations can continue to learn, grow, and build lifelong memories here.

As we look ahead, we are also proud to announce the upcoming launch of our new three year strategic plan: Foundations for the Future – A Plan for Enduring Impact. This plan will guide our organization through the next phase of growth and transformation and reflects deep reflection, learning, and listening across our community. Please stay tuned to our website as we prepare to launch!

One area of focus that is especially meaningful to our team is the continued partnership with Serpent River First Nation (SRFN). We are committed to deepening this relationship and continuing to learn from Indigenous leaders as we build a stronger connection to the land we operate on. This spring, our staff will participate in a comprehensive cultural training workshop, and our full summer staff team will continue learning from the education staff at SRFN. These opportunities are essential to our journey toward deeper understanding, respect, and responsible stewardship.

As we approach the summer season, we are filled with gratitude for the support of our alumni and community, and with excitement for what lies ahead. We look forward to a summer defined by continued growth, meaningful learning, strengthened relationships, and—most importantly—memorable camp experiences for all who call John Island home, even if just for a while.



John Island Camp FLASHBACK!

John Island Wilderness Camp Located On Aitken Island

In the mid 1960's, John Island operated a Wilderness Camp for 16 year olds on Aitken Island. The group started camp with the main JIC opening campfire and then returned only for the final campfire at season's end. They kept their own lot of food and program supplies on Aitken and it became the base for many canoe trips.

SCOTT'S THOUGHTS



Feels like yesterday we were walking off the Island at the end of our 2025 season, only to find ourselves once again in April, awaiting the snow and ice to melt to get right back to it in 2026. As we enter year 73, and higher demand for camp spaces than recent years, the team has been busy bringing together an incredible summer staff for 2026. We also had incredible volunteer support in 2025, helping to maintain facility and keep camp in great shape, and are looking forward to welcoming them and more back to the Island this season.

Through generous donations from camp Alumni, as well as various grants the YMCA team was able to obtain, a number of significant improvements and upgrades have taken place since camp opened in 2025.

We reported last year that major renovations to the support structure of the dining hall were taking place. New support posts were installed as well as added structural supports were added and the building is now sits on a solid base for years to come. The Out tripping building has been under renovation for a few years, but now the alterations are complete, a new steel roof is completed and the 1990 structure is fully functional. This building now houses out tripping, ropes storage as well as a dedicated space for camp staff to unwind.

Our main camp boats (Panther, Barge and Garoo) have been kept in top operation shape and when camp opens this year Garoo will be sporting a newly rebuilt engine. Garoo was obtained by the camp in the year 2000 and was the first of the three Stanley boats we use for transporting people and supplies to and from camp. Also the boat that keeps you dry on those rainy or rough water days.

In the kitchen our 35 year old dishwasher will be respectfully put in reserve storage and replaced by a new, but similar, model this spring.

Last fall we added a new 20kw generator to replace the aging 40kw generator. This new tandem will now sit in a newly built shed where we will have access to a backup system should the need arise, as well as during scheduled maintenance. We also continue to update and add some new solar powered lighting in key building such as the wellness center, as well as repair and replace existing system to bring lights back to the woods and beach greenway cabins.

Lasalle Secondary students will be back again this year for the 20th year to continue the construction of new and removed facilities. The plans are currently under way for a new museum to be built that will house the interesting and fascinating history of John Island – both the lumber mill and John Island Camp.

So much of the work that we are able to complete yearly is due to the generous support of our alumni and volunteers. It allows us to ensure that camp remains a safe and fun place for youth to create lifelong memories and friendships and develop essential life skills

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John Island Camp FLASHBACK!

Original Flush Toilets and Shower

With the opening of camp in 1954, Campers and staff were able to experience a series of flush toilets and a shower room -an exceptional facility for a camp. With the problems with proper drainage in sandy soil, the unit was eventually replaced.

Rebecca Gauthier - a Builder!

Celebrating Over 20 Years of Partnership with the YMCA John Island Rejuvenation Project – Youth working for Youth

For more than two decades, Lasalle Secondary School with the Rainbow District School Board has proudly partnered with YMCA Sudbury in a unique and impactful construction project that continues to shape the lives of our students and strengthen our community. This long-standing collaboration is a testament to the power of experiential learning and the value of meaningful community partnerships

For over 20 years, students in Grades 11 and 12 have had the opportunity to step outside their traditional classroom and participate in unique and meaningful hands-on construction projects. Under the guidance of skilled and licensed teacher mentors starting with Peter Lucano, Jonathan Black, and currently Chad Leclair and Co-operative Education teachers Rebecca Gauthier (current) and Linda Urisk (retired) (all from Lasalle SS), students have contributed to real-world builds and renovations that have supported the longevity of the buildings and spaces of YMCA John Island. These projects not only leave a lasting physical impact at the camp itself, but also for everyone involved, with a lasting sense of pride and accomplishment.

A major highlight of this program is that many participating students are signed on as Level 1 Construction apprentices. This provides them with a significant head start in the skilled trades, allowing them to begin accumulating hours and gaining recognized industry hands-on experience all while still in high school! For many students, this opportunity opens the door to rewarding careers and helps ease the transition from school to the workforce

Over the years, the construction work has offered students a wide range of valuable, hands-on experiences. Students have taken part in the rebuilding of cabins and outhouses, the renovation of various facilities, and the ongoing updating and

maintenance of existing buildings. These projects have not only improved the functionality of these buildings, but has also given students exposure to a wide range of construction skills and real-world challenges

The program has evolved to reflect current industry standards while maintaining its core focus: giving students practical experience in the skilled trades. From carpentry and site preparation to safety training and project co-ordination, students gain valuable technical knowledge that prepares them for future pathways - whether in apprenticeships, post-secondary education, or the workforce. Students are trained in proper workplace practices, ensuring they understand how to work responsibly and confidently in a construction environment. These lessons extend far beyond the job site, helping students develop discipline, accountability, and a strong work ethic.



Rebecca Gauthier



Initial Lasalle project instructor Peter Lucano with students on the job.



Lasalle instructor Jonathan Black with stu-



Instructor Jonathan Black with Rebecca at John Island

Continued on next page . . .

Rebecca Gauthier - a builder (Cont'd from previous page)

Equally important are the transferable skills students build along the way. Communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving are at the heart of every project. By collaborating with their fellow peers, their construction teacher, and several YMCA Sudbury John Island personnel including Gary Gray, Scott Thomas, Kendra MacIsaac, and John Schmitt (former CEO of YMCA Sudbury) (to name just a few of so many involved with this project), students have learned how to address and solve challenges, meet deadlines, and contribute effectively as part of a team.

The longevity of our partnership with YMCA Sudbury speaks to its success and lasting impact. Over the years, many Lasalle S.S. students have taken part and benefited from this program, gaining not only hands-on, practical skills and experiences, but also confidence in their abilities and a clearer vision of their future. As we celebrate over 20 years of working together, we look forward to continuing this tradition of excellence - empowering students, supporting our community, and building a stronger future, one project at a time.



Lasalle instructor Chad Leclair with students at camp



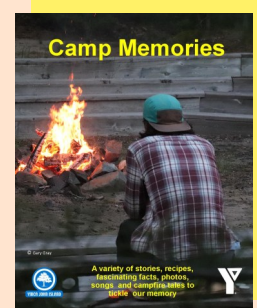
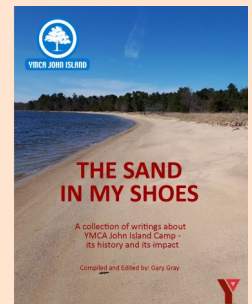
Lasalle Students renovating Woods Greenway cabin

Reignite your camp experience

Two soft cover books recall the John Island story starting with the theft of a lumber mill in 1885 and continuing to today's camp.

- over 85 personal stories about John Island Camp written by camp alumni
- stories about building the camp by those who built it
- stories about living in the lumbering village by those who lived there
- including historical and current day maps, hundreds of photos, songs from camp, favourite recipes, and so much more.

“The Sand in My Shoes” and “Camp Memories” are each \$25.00 (+ tax) and are available at the YMCA in Sudbury. To order to have mailed to you if living outside Sudbury, contact Gary Gray at gary.gray@ymcaneoc.ca



Fill the Bus Campaign Sends Kids to Camp

There is no question about it. Like everything else in life today, the cost of a good camp experience is rising. But at a time with so much turmoil in the world, overnight camp with strong leadership and excellent facilities is an oasis that still provides for valuable real life experiences.

The Fill the Bus Campaign operated by the YMCA of Northeastern Ontario (Sudbury, North Bay and Timmins) raised just over \$200,000 to help send kids to John Island Camp and over 40 day camp experiences provided Y the 3 Y's. That has had amazing positive impact on hundreds of youth.

The 2026 Fill the Bus Campaign is currently under way with excellent results. Organizations such as Dejaradin and the Loughheed Foundation are each matching donations up to a total of \$30,000 each. It is expected the campaign will raise over \$200,000 once again this year.



Camp from Above

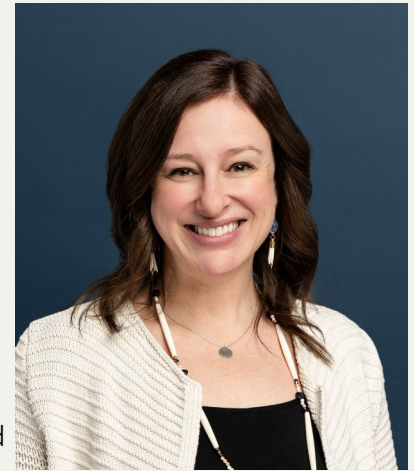
The beauty and serenity of John Island Camp is felt most when viewed from above. We thank two of our camp alumni for these two beautiful photos. The first was taken by Norah Cavallin from a plane when flying over the island and shows everything from the front beach, the back harbour and the north entrance to the camp waters (top and center of the photo). The second photo was taken by Peter Whittington using drone and shows the low water docks, the bridge and the front beach on the far left and top of the photo.



Inspired by John Island Stories

By Cristin Talentino

Vice President Philanthropy
& Community Engagement
YMCA of Northeastern Ontario



Since joining the YMCA Northeastern Ontario team, I've been deeply humbled.

Hearing so many community stories about how the Y has impacted people's lives has truly been a gift. I've listened to stories of camp, summers on the island, and the people who shape our experiences in ways that leave a lasting and meaningful impact that ripples gently through generations.

I grew up in North Bay and many of my summers were spent outdoors. My mother sparked a deeply meaningful relationship with nature in my heart, and some of my earliest memories are from time spent in Georgian Bay. Hearing stories of my great grandparents' time on Cariboo Island on Lake Superior, where they lived for nine years, raising their children close to the land, and sensing the quiet depth of their connection to the outdoors has always made me proud and curious. My love for camp, the outdoors, and the shared experiences they create has continued to ripple through my hobbies, my career, and my passion for this region.

In many ways, I hear cherished pieces of my own story in the stories I've heard from John Island campers.

I've been deeply inspired hearing about friendships that began at camp and have lasted decades. I'm inspired by the generations of campers who keep returning to this very special place. I'm inspired by stories about teachers, leaders, parents, and community builders who trace a small but important part of who they became back to their time on the island.

What is clear to me is that the sense of belonging and acceptance people speak about here is not something that is simply said. It is something that is experienced deeply, across generations and across places. Over time, John Island has become a beacon for connection to ourselves, to each other, and to the land we hold so dear.

Places like John Island Camp don't just create memories. They shape people. And when you listen closely to the stories alumni share, you begin to see how those experiences ripple forward through lives, families, careers, and communities.

It is humbling to witness a community passionately carrying this legacy forward through volunteering, supporting camp improvements, contributing to bursaries, writing stories for the newsletter, or simply staying connected to the island and encouraging the next generation to experience it.

That kind of stewardship is something special.

As I begin my time working alongside this community, I'm grateful for the chance to learn from the people who know this place best. I look forward to visiting the island this summer, hearing more of your stories, and understanding how John Island has inspired cherished memories that last for generations.

We have had several alumni enquire about alternate ways of donating to John Island Camp. Cristin is the "go to" person for any of our camp alumni who have considered donating stock or other commodities or are thinking of including camp in a will.
cristin.talentino@ymcaneo.ca



John Island Camp FLASHBACK!

Two Camp Maintenance Directors Reminisce About Early Days

Bill Bavington ("Wee Willie") and Don Mitchell stand behind the Kismet—the original camp boat owned by the Mitchells and used for daily trips to Spanish for food and mail and to transport campers to camp. Bill became a medical doctor and university prof in Newfoundland and Don a high school principal in North Bay.

Ralph the Rattler - a Real Snake Story

By Grant Pilkey (a real teacher)

I was a science teacher at Sudbury High.

One day in September I got a call from a prof at Laurentian University. Two guys had been fishing on the lower French River. They captured a Massasauga rattlesnake which they put in a large pickle jar at the lodge where they were staying.

When they returned to Sudbury, they dropped the jar off at Laurentian University. Would I be interested in a live rattlesnake? I said, "sure!"

After school, I cleaned out a large aquarium. In one corner I put a strong cardboard with a hole in one side to be a den. I fashioned a strong lid from a piece of heavy metal screen that the shop teacher had.

A very irate snake arrived at the school the next day. I transferred him to his new home and put him in a basement room for a bit of quiet time. I dropped a mouse in for him to consume. I had a large glass case in one window in my room. It had doors that could be locked. That's where he landed the next day.

My students were thrilled to have a new attraction in the room, They were anxious to see him eat a mouse. Once a week one class got to see him strike and swallow a mouse. A snake's windpipe is free at the upper end so that when his mouth is full of mouse, the windpipe slides out so he can still breath.

Nine weeks later all my students had seen a rattlesnake eat a mouse.

In June I was at a meeting with Al Will at the Sudbury YMCA. Al was the camp director for John Island that summer. I mentioned that I wasn't sure what to do with my rattlesnake for the summer holidays. Al said "We'll take him to camp." When school closed for the summer, my rattlesnake headed for John Island Camp.

In September my rattlesnake arrived home at room 164 at Sudbury High. He was tanned and looked very fit. At awards night he had received a recognition.,

Ralph the Ratler consumed 15 mice in one summer as a camper at John Island Camp. Thank you Ralph!"

As far as I know, his record still holds.

One day as I was preparing to go home after school, I remembered that Ralph hadn't eaten for a while. I dropped a mouse into his cage, locked up and went home. The next morning when I entered my room, the front glass of his cage was smeared with blood. Ralph was coiled in his usual place. . . a very much alive mouse was sitting on his head grooming itself.

A search of the literature revealed that venomous snakes lose their ability to strike and kill their prey if kept in captivity. These snakes are not usually fed live prey. Over the fall and winter Ralph molted several times. His rattle never grew back. One day in early spring, I returned to my room after lunch. Ralph was sprawled across his cage. Ralph the Rattler had left the building.

In the Fall edition, Grant writes about the famous "hot-spring" lake on John Island



Grant Pilkey is an active John Island Camp supporter. He currently lives at his home in Peterborough. Grant is a past chair of the Board of Directors of the Sudbury YMCA, a member of the Y's Men's Club (the group that built John Island Camp) and an active tuba player in his '90's. Grant has more stories to tell than are found in most libraries.

. . . and it changed my life

by Winter Blades



Winter with Sparky the Spaniel

Hi, my name is Winter Blades, and this is my camp story. When I was little, every summer I watched my older brother get ready and fly off to summer camp from our home in St. John's, Newfoundland, and patiently wait for him to come home so he could tell me all about his adventures and all of the fun he'd had. He began going to John Island when I was two and every summer after until I was eight. I didn't really understand it at the time, but all I knew were the stories he would tell me about him sailing the giant boats, playing outside with his friends all day, and swimming in the sun. It sounded like magic. And it is.

This camp is special. My mother is originally from Sudbury and attended John Island when she was a kid with my uncle. The camp was quite different then, but the pull to keep coming back stayed the same. After my parents, all of my cousins went, and then it was our turn. Before I started going to camp, I spent the summers on the east coast, playing in the ocean in Newfoundland and running around fields in Nova Scotia, it was all I ever wanted so when it was finally my time to go to John Island, I was less than pleased if I'm being honest. It was new, and far from everything I knew and was comfortable with. I was terrified and convinced that I would hate it. Obviously, I was wrong.

My first summer at camp changed everything. I went into it completely overwhelmed with the idea of being in a new place and all alone, and yet I had such a special time. The first year at camp is always the most important. It sets the foundation for the rest of a child's camping journey. That first year I met some of my best friends to this day. It was those friends who made me want to come back. We planned every summer after to come back and made our parents ensure we were registered for the same session.

In 2022 I completed the Greenway leadership program, and in 2023 returned once again to complete Norquay. The summers I spent in Greenway and Norquay are some of the best of my life, 10 days on the Spanish river for Greenway and 28 days on the Missinaibi river for Norquay. These programs gave me leadership skills, access to the most beautiful landscapes, strength, and my best friends. I also grew a lot as a person on these trips; they were some of the toughest weeks both mentally and physically for me and I would do them again in a heartbeat. My group for these trips are some of my best friends to this day. I find it hard to explain this to people who do not go to camp, why the friendships that I have made here are so different and are the most special to me. It is something entirely different than how friendships are developed outside of camp.

Having the opportunities to explore nature in the ways that going to John Island allows you to is so rare and special. It was these experiences that lead to my love of nature and allowed me to develop a passion for studying environmental science in university.

The summers of 2024 and 2025 I was on the staff team. I knew right away after my first year attending camp that I was going to one day work there, I idolized my counsellors and knew that one day I wanted to give the magic they gave me to other campers so they could experience camp the way I did. I have played many roles on the staff team, all of them gave me that sense of fulfilment I had been wanting since I was a camper. In 2025 I led the explorer canoe leadership program with one of my best friends Zach. This was my first big trip that I was leading, which was so different than being a camper. I was so used to having leaders on trip and it was so exciting and nerve-wracking to get to be the leader. We spent 9 days paddling the Matagamasi Lake loop through rain and wind, it was so much fun. It so rewarding to get to lead this trip, and to watch our campers fall in love with tripping as much as we had. Getting to lead the trip with Zach was also incredibly special for me, having completed both Greenway and Norquay together. It was a very surreal experience one that I will cherish forever.

Everyone in my life knows about John Island, it is a part of me. The experiences and challenges I've faced, the people I've been lucky enough to call my friends, the amazing people that camp running, and the beautiful water we get to swim in every day are why I keep going back to camp and why I hope future campers continue to go back. John Island Camp is my happy place, and I'm a better person for the knowing of it.

Annual Work Weekend—May 8 - 10

GREAT FOOD! GREAT FRIENDSHIPS! GREAT WEATHER! . . . All at a great camp during the annual Work . Grab your favourite sleeping bag and working clothes and join an amazing group of JIC alumni as we work together to help get camp ready for another season.



When you read all the interesting developments at the camp, you will want to be part of the weekend to see what all is happening since you were there last time. Also, we had a hard winter in the North Shore area and we will have lots of clean up work to get done before camp officially opens.

Children (with parents, of course) are welcome as there is always lots of chores to be done by all ages - everyone can help. Details are finalized as we go to press, but save the date - Friday May 8 to Sunday May 10th. Details and all arrangements will be provided on the John Island Camp website and an e-mail confirming details which will confirm boat times, jobs to be done, and a registration form.

There is no cost to attend the work weekend, just an enthusiasm for camp work and fun with other camp folk.

Registering for the Spring Work Weekend is easy. This QR code will take you directly to the on line registration form



Camp Chapel Refurbished

One of the most meaningful developments at John Island Camp this past year has been the impact of the Gary Project, an initiative created to celebrate Gary Gray's 25 years of volunteer service and his lasting contributions to camp;

Thanks to the incredible generosity of our alumni, and with additional support from the Rotary Club of Sudbury, we were able to rebuild and refurbish Chapel Point. This space has always held deep meaning at camp and it was especially important to Gary. Today, it stands as a beautiful place for reflection, connection and community.

We had the opportunity to use Chapel Point during Youth Camp A for a reflections program centered on friendship. This felt particularly fitting as Gary's legacy is rooted in the friendships he has built and nurtured over the years. His impact continues to be felt across generations of campers and staff. We held a small ceremony during Family Camp 2025 to celebrate Gary's contributions.

Donations are still accepted online.

Looking ahead, we hope to continue this legacy by using the remaining funds from the Gary Project to develop a small museum at camp. This space would honour Gary's passion for camp history, including his extensive work documenting the island's past, from its logging mill and village days to the rich history of John Island Camp. Many of you will know his books—The Sand in my Shoes and Memories.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the Gary Project and helped bring this vision to life

- by Cashel Moss



The Distance Travelled

By Leo Strauss

My name is Leo. I've been going to John Island Camp longer than I can remember. This camp is woven into every part of who I am in ways I am both aware of and not. I was two years old at my first family camp session in 2010 and I spend every summer discovering new reasons why I'm grateful for this spectacular, precious place.

Except for the pandemic, I've gone back every summer since. When I was old enough, I became an Adventure and Youth camp camper. Once Covid ended, I got to paddle both the Spanish and Missinaibi Rivers as a Greenway and Norquay camper with some of my now lifelong friends, good folks I'll hold close forever, yet people I'd have walked right past in a school hallway. The long nights of laughter around a campfire, the never ending paddle days, seeing each other through challenging times are all memories I look back on with frustration because I'll probably never have an experience like it again.

Every Missinaibi trip has one notorious day: "Hell's Gate". This section includes a 2.3 km portage over rough terrain, hills, and mud. Its safe to say Hell's Gate lives up to its name.

On our day at Hell's Gate, things went pretty smoothly. We finished the entire portage faster than any of us expected, though ask anyone on that trip and you'll get a completely different number. Once back on the river, we just had to paddle a few kms downstream and around a few rapids to get to our site. Despite our fatigue, spirits were high because we'd basically completed the most dreaded day of the entire trip.

Two kilometers after the portage, we hit a swift. Being the second to last boat, I had no problem following the same path as the others in front of me. But I'd seemed to have used up my luck on my smooth run of Hell's Gate. My bow and I hit a pillow rock (a rock that appears to be smooth because the water runs right over it), causing my first tip on trip. Of course we hadn't tied much into the boat because of our overconfidence about the assumed easy paddle ahead of us.

We pulled off the river and collected our packs. Pretty soon we realized the camera with most of our photos from the entire trip had been swept down the river along with my pride. To this day my friends still ridicule me for that loss. Even though that camera keeps me up at night, I would lose it hundreds of times again if it meant I could relive that trip. I would hear my friends' whines and taunts everyday for the rest of my life if it meant I could even just do Hell's Gate again. I'd tip every canoe I ever paddle if it meant I could have one more memory made on that river with those friends

My summer as a Norquay changed me. It left a hole in my heart that yearns for just one more summer as a camper, but it also shaped who I've become outside of John Island. It's easy to tell someone "Outtrip taught me so much more than a classroom ever could," or "I got to connect with nature and take a break from the rest of the world." But for me, outtrip taught me resilience and flexibility. It strips off all the fluff that you think matters in life to expose what really does.

The relentless pace that normal life feels like at home is the mirror opposite of life on trip. Sure, you have fast rapids, and endless portages, but there's a calmness to it all. Getting to site and reflecting on the distance you travelled, whether it was 5 kms or 50. Focusing your day around how your paddle will go and when you'll have each meal. Simplifying everything reveals perspectives you never saw, appreciation you never felt, and a need for one more trip you never knew you needed. These are rewards worth every 50 km day, every long portage, and every tip from my Norquay summer.



Leo being presented the "Spirit of John Island" award by camp director Cashel and Asst. Director Bridget

Cont'd on next page

The Distance Travelled (Cont'd from prev. page)

Getting tossed into a group of teenagers you may not have anything in common with sounds like a complete nightmare for most people. Even now I tell my Norquay friends, "If we had gone to the same high school, I don't think we'd be friends". But that's part of what makes these summers so special and one of the things I appreciate most. In our lives off island, outside of JIC, we hold ourselves back so much. How you act and how you are perceived takes up so much energy. At camp, that falls away, it doesn't matter and you find parts of your personality and identity you never knew existed.

This summer will be my 15th at JIC and my third year on staff. Although the memories change, the sand is still the same. So is the feeling. I hope to see you there.

Camp Alumni Donations Improve Quality of Camp

Our John Island Camp Alumni are also help respond to the increasing costs that are affecting camps. In the past 3 years, the John Island Alumni have raised money for a bursary to which John Island campers may apply if registered for a John Island Leadership Training Program (Norquay, Greenway and St. Prospector). This program is helping the camp to ensure it has good, committed leadership for its programs in years to come. The bursaries range from \$250 to \$1,000 and are applied to the camper's registration fees for the program.

The original idea for an Alumni bursary came from David Horne back a few years ago and in the past few years it was felt the leadership training programs were the most deserving of bursary support.

More information about the bursary program, including this year's recipients (see page 4).

To donate to the bursary program or JIC capital or other needs, go to the following YMCA page and hit "How to direct my donation" on the "donate" button [YMCA Donate Page – YMCA of Northeastern Ontario](#) and the John Island donation options will scroll down for you to consider.

WANT TO HELP CAMP? HERE'S HOW!

On the back cover we list several ways to help. We are fortunate that we have a very dedicated alumni at YMCA John Island Camp and they want to help camp continue for years ahead.

FINANCIAL HELP - the three primary areas of financial need supported most by alumni are:

- A) The John Island Camp Capital Fund (for details see below)
- B) The Alumni Leadership Bursary Fund - (see page 4)
- C) The John Island Campership Fund which provides for financial assistance to parents needing assistance to send their children to John Island

Donations to each area can be made to YMCA John Island Camp (charitable receipts available) visit the website to make donations: ymcaneoc.ca@john-island-camp and hit "DONATE"

VOLUNTEER HELP - There are **Work Weekends** - May 8-10, 2026 (details available soon)
(e-mail cashel.moss@ymcaneoc.ca to register)

- There are **Newsletter stories** to be written -contact gary.gray@ymcaneoc.ca

And most important, be a **Camp Ambassador** by telling your family members and friends about the great opportunities at an outstanding YMCA overnight camp for youth. Information will be on line at ymcaneoc.ca@john-island-camp

YMCA John Island Camp - where you belong



JIC ALUMNI

Alumni and Friends of the Camp are the life blood of John Island Camp. Our goal is to provide support to the ongoing life of the camp and to provide a means for alumni to keep engaged with the camp.

There are several ways alumni can support the camp and keep it part of their lives.

It is easy to donate on line - see page 15 for details

- Annual Spring Weekends (no special skills required)
- Write for the Alumni Newsletter (Your story will be read)
- Bring your family to Family Camp (Many already do)
- Contribute to the JIC Capital Fund (Help keep OUR camp in great shape)
- Sponsor a camper (Any amount helps)
- Contribute to the Alumni and Friends of JIC Leadership Bursary Fund
- Be a John Island Camp Ambassador

The YMCA John Island Camp Alumni Newsletter is published 2 times a year with semi occasional Special Editions.

For comments or to submit articles or content ideas: gary.gray@ymcaneo.ca
 Visit the John Island page on the website of the YMCA of Northeastern Ontario to access all past issues of this newsletter. www.ymcaneo.ca/john-island-camp

www.ymcaneo.ca/john-island-camp

on Facebook: YMCA John Island Camp

