

The Ottawa County Way

By Michael Scott Pearson

We stood on a high dune and looked out on the desolate landscape. There was beauty in its nothingness. The inland sea was now frozen in place. The evidence of its fight to remain free was obvious in the undulating freshwater knolls. Where the ice met the sky there was barely a break. All was gray and white. The bitter, bitter wind nipped at our cheeks and the tips of our noses. But we had to see it; we had to visit; especially this year; especially here. For this was **winter** *the Ottawa County way*.

As far as the eye could see to the left, and to the right. They were three rows deep, anchored just off shore, bobbing in the two foot swells. Powerboats and sailboats; pontoon boats and yachts. Row after, row, after row. On the beach there were families, there were friends and there were lovers. Swimmers and sunbathers; waders and walkers. They were eating and drinking, snacking and snoozing. There were Frisbees and volleyballs; a water fight and a touch football game. Dogs chased balls into the surf; retrieving, shaking and jumping back in for more. There were umbrellas, and grills and coolers galore. Beach chairs and blankets; music and laughter. The sun was high, the sand was hot, the water was cool. The day was perfect. This was **summer** *the Ottawa County way*.

It starts out with the high clouds all painted in a deep purple. Their lower edges are lit brilliantly, glowing with a yellow that is so nearly white. The backdrop still hints at a variation of blue, but it's deepening to the blackness that chases it high overhead. Closer to the horizon the oranges and reds meld into a color indescribable and extraordinary. And then at its heart, the fiery ball, the brilliant orange sun. Oval now, yet still burning too bright to watch. But we can't look away. We can't miss this moment. Now

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the thin dark line defining the edge of the earth slowly and evenly absorbs the glowing orb. And the reflection in the water – the colors, the textures - ceases to be possible and real. The beauty, so beyond words. And for that moment out here at the end of the pier, no one says a word. Now that's a **sunset** *the Ottawa County way*.

It was pitch black on both sides of the road. Soil so rich and so dark it seemed to absorb all the light of the early morning sun. The smell of onions was strong and mingled with the earthiness and rain that fell the night before. In one field I watched a tractor slowly make its way across the blackness. The blade tilling behind it appeared as if it were cutting black frosting – soft and moist. On the other side of the road, in another field were onions, celery and asparagus. Beyond that lettuce and radishes, and then more onions. Workers were unloading large empty onion crates from a truck. Others prepped the picking machine attached to the tractor; the one with the very thin wheels. Then there were those who waited with shovels and hoes. Harvest time was here in the muck fields. And it was time to get to **work** *the Ottawa County way*.

I hiked over sand dunes, kayaked a river, and watched a bald eagle fishing for its breakfast. I took a boat ride out the channel, water skied on an inland lake, and body surfed in six-foot waves. I played a round of golf on a beautiful course, got lost in a corn maze, and ran in a 5K race. I went bird watching in a park, mountain-biked a hilly trail, and camped on the beach. I saw moms and dads with their kids in the park; pushing them on swings, splashing in fountains. I watched young athletes compete on the gridiron, on courts and on fields. I watched teams win, I watched teams lose. And at the end of it all I watched them shake hands, and say 'good game' and 'nice job out there.' This is how we **play** *the Ottawa County way*.

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We served on the Fire Department. We were called volunteers and each person had a “day job.” It was an eclectic blend of personalities and gifts. Some funny. Some stoic. Some book smart. Some street smart. There were plumbers and electricians; a cement guy and a carpenter; a mechanic and a barber; there was an engineer and a few business owners; there were some with college degrees, while others had earned their diploma from the ‘school of hard knocks’. Most were moms and dads. There were a few sets of brothers on the crew; a couple of fathers and sons; even a husband and wife. As individuals we were all very different, save for one commonality. When asked who will serve their community; who will get up at two AM on a frigid February morning, jump in their cold truck and rush out to the aid of another? Who will risk their life and their livelihood? Who will forgo a birthday party, or a baptism, or a barbecue by the pool when the alarm goes off? In this diverse group, all to a person had raised their hand and quietly answered, “I will.” Now, that’s **serv**ing *the Ottawa County Way*.

There was this girl, a middle-schooler. Seventh grade, I think. She was born with a disorder that affected the nerves and arteries in her legs. The condition worsened in one of her legs to a point where amputation was the only solution. But she had dream. Before the surgery she wanted to play basketball... with a real team... with both legs. She had tried out but didn’t make the middle school team. She stayed on anyway, keeping the scorebook and cheering on the team she didn’t make. But when the coach found out about her pending surgery; when he found out she was going to lose her leg, he got her a uniform, and put her in the next game. Her parents had no idea. When the team came out of the locker room, there she was. Her parents cried. The coach smiled. And the crowd cheered. Now, that’s **love** *the Ottawa County way*.

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They stood there all dressed in purple. Out of context they may have even looked silly. But here, on this court, in this gym they looked really quite amazing. They stood in a long line across the gym and faced the crowd that was standing, smiling and waving. The room was awash in a sea of purple. Each player, every girl, every boy on the high school teams wore a purple jersey with a name on the back. Next to each of them, stood another person. Some young. Some old. Men and women. Boys and girls. Some were survivors – these were the names on the jerseys. But some were stand-ins for those who had lost the battle. This was Hoops for Hope. And after all were introduced, each player, each person living or not, they played the game. Dressed in purple. That night, that beautiful purple night, \$6,000 was raised for cancer research. Now that's **giving** *the Ottawa County way*.

A friend visited me from the big city. With honesty and directness he asked me why I lived here. Yes, he was a bit smug, but I merely smiled at this and simply said, let me show you. First, I drove him past farmers harvesting their corn, past greenhouses where they were planting annuals, and then past fields of blueberries ripening in the sun. Then it was down a boulevard and across a draw-bridge, and then on to the highway. I pointed to businesses along the way and explained how inventors and innovators were reimagining the corporate workplace, and designing rearview mirrors, and the batteries for electric cars. I took him out for amazing thin crust pizza, then a hot dog on a stick and finally some fine craft beer. We explored a wind mill, an ice breaker and a lighthouse. I took him to a parade steeped in immigrant heritage and then to an art festival, and then salmon fishing off a charter boat out on the big lake. We visited shops on Main Street, walked through a college campus, then on to another with a beautiful new library. We drove through neighborhoods with ice cream trucks, swimming pools and kids with lemonade stands. He joined our family on a run with our dogs through the hard woods, and then he came along as

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we walked two miles on the beach. We watched a water fountain dance and listened to a live band. That night around a campfire, we ate hot dogs and s'mores and watched lightening dance far out over the water. And as we all sat there silently watching the distant storm, I caught my friend smiling. No words were needed. It was obvious. He got it now. This was **living** *the Ottawa County way*.