



PRESS RELEASE

URBAN INDIGENOUS SCHOOL NOW HAS LAND, INFLUENCE, AND OPPORTUNITY AT AFTON NATURE CENTER

A state grant is making it possible for Anishinabe Academy in Minneapolis and Belwin Conservancy in Afton to work together on education and land management.

July 21, 2021 (AFTON, Minn.) — With the legislature’s passage and governor’s signature on June 29 of the [Environment and Natural Resources Omnibus Bill](#), Anishinabe Academy and Belwin Conservancy are excited and grateful for a new partnership made possible with state funding.

The “Restoring Land, Reviving Heritage: Conservation Through Indigenous Culture” project will make it possible for Anishinabe Academy, a Minneapolis Public School, to have dedicated land for gardening, learning, and cultural experiences at Belwin Conservancy, in the St. Croix Valley. At the same time, Belwin will benefit from Indigenous influence on its land management activities, and further its mission to inspire connection and engagement with nature.

“By linking natural resource management, cultural heritage, and environmental education, we aim to not only restore an ecologically significant area of land, but also spark generations of stewardship, and support restoration of Indigenous culture,” says Katie Bloome, Belwin Conservancy Executive Director.

Funding for the program comes from the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. The Trust Fund is a permanent fund constitutionally established by the citizens of Minnesota.

The project will dedicate 17 acres of land at Belwin for the exclusive use of Anishinabe Academy. The school’s students and their families will visit the land on field trips throughout the year, which will be led by Native Elders and experts in ecology. It will also be home to a garden where the school will cultivate Indigenous food and medicine. Parts of the parcel that are degraded by buckthorn and other invasive species will be restored with Indigenous knowledge and ways included at every step from planning to planting.

“Many urban Indigenous communities have lost connections to nature and their food heritage, but Indigenous Peoples have never given up our sense of responsibility to one another and to the land. It is this relationship with the land that has sustained Native people and will continue to do so in the future,” says Cece Benimon, Anishinabe Academy Family Liaison. “This



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collaboration between Belwin Conservancy and Anishinabe Academy continues this relationship with our younger generation, allowing students to have hands-on experience working with the land.”

Over its first two years, the innovative “Restoring Land, Reviving Heritage” project will teach participants about Native garden principles, astronomy, ecology, scientific measurements, Indigenous traditions, and land-management principles, all with the help of Ojibwe and Dakota language experts. For example, one lesson will be based on the herd of bison that grazes Belwin’s prairie each summer. Families will connect the cultural significance of the animals to the ecological benefits they give to the prairie ecosystem.

Belwin and Anishinabe Academy have partnered since 2018 on smaller projects, while developing the idea that would become this project. The recent funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund will make it possible to launch and operate the program for two years. The partners hope it will continue for decades, and Belwin plans for Anishinabe Academy to have long-term influence over the parcel.

“Restoring Land, Reviving Heritage” is similar to Belwin’s partnership with Saint Paul Public Schools since 1971. In both collaborative efforts, the schools get space and support, and the experienced teachers, curious students, and family relationships help achieve Belwin’s work to spark passion for nature every day through conservation, education, and immersive experiences.

Photo: [Belwin_AnishinabeAcademyStudent.jpg](#)

Photo caption: A new partnership made possible with state funding will provide students from Anishinabe Academy, a Minneapolis Public School, with dedicated land for gardening, learning, and cultural experiences at Belwin Conservancy.

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ABOUT ANISHINABE ACADEMY

[Anishinabe Academy](#) is a pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade Minneapolis Public School, which exists to engage urban Indigenous students by integrating and reclaiming Native American identities, cultures and languages through authentic academic experiences.

ABOUT BELWIN CONSERVANCY

[Belwin Conservancy](#) is a nonprofit organization with a mission of inspiring connection and engagement with the natural world. At Belwin, we spark passion for wild places through a variety of innovative experiential programs that include the arts, astronomy, athletic fields, bison, education, and public access to our restored lands. Through land protection and habitat restoration, we revive threatened ecosystems so wildlife can thrive for generations to come. Located in Afton, Minnesota, on the ancestral home of the Wahpekute Dakota people, Belwin's 1,500 acres of permanently protected land includes woodland, prairie, oak savanna, ponds, streams, and wetlands.

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