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BELWIN

BELWIN CONSERVANCY ANNOUNCES TRANSFORMATIVE CAMPAIGN TO EXPAND ACCESS *\$7.8 million raised to date in historic campaign*

Afton, MN – Belwin Conservancy is announcing the launch of **Inspiring Through Nature, a \$10.2 million capital campaign to make one of the metro area’s most diverse nature preserves more accessible to students, families, and nature enthusiasts.** Thanks to the early support of generous donors, Belwin has raised \$7.8 million toward this goal. This campus-wide campaign will improve educational facilities, open more land to the public, and protect and restore critical habitat in the Valley Creek Watershed.

“We know people benefit from time spent in nature. But as the area around Belwin develops, wild spaces are being lost. People need places where they can sustain that connection,” says Katie Bloome, Belwin’s Executive Director. “Belwin remains an oasis of wilderness remarkably close to the city, and we have a unique opportunity to bridge a growing gap in access to pristine natural spaces. Simple investments will make it so more people can benefit from time in nature.”

Inspiring Through Nature is Belwin’s first capital campaign since its founding in 1970. At the heart of this drive is the creation of the new 5,000-square-foot **Peter J. King Family Foundation Wetlands Center.** For 50 years, Belwin has partnered with Saint Paul Public Schools to provide environmental education to the children of the district, but has lacked sufficient space to expand this opportunity to students from neighboring districts. With the expanded capacity afforded by this new facility, Belwin will be able to accommodate an additional 5,000 students per year, including students from Stillwater Area Public Schools.

“Environmental education is a key component that is currently not universally available to our students. This new building will provide environmental access to the students of the Stillwater district,” says Mike Funk, Superintendent of Stillwater Area Public Schools.

The new education center will also be the new home of Belwin's adaptive outdoor education programs for children with special needs, operated for 48 years in partnership with Saint Paul Public Schools. Designed with accessibility and sustainability in mind, the building will feature support spaces like calm rooms, easy access to surrounding paved trails for children and adults with mobility devices, and geothermal heating and cooling.

"Saint Paul Public Schools students have had the privilege of visiting Belwin every year since 1971. For many, it is their first time experiencing the beauty and vastness of nature. We are thrilled that this space will become even more welcoming and inclusive for the next generation of SPPS students," said SPPS Interim Superintendent John Thein.

Lead gifts to the Inspiring Through Nature campaign include \$2 million from the Bell/Hartwell Family, \$1.3 million from the Peter J. King Family Foundation, \$1 million from Washington County Land and Water Legacy Program, \$500,000 from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, \$435,000 from the Smikis Foundation, \$380,000 from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, and \$250,000 from the Fred C. and Katherine B. Andersen Foundation.

Additional campaign investments will include clearer, more visible entrance signage and infrastructure across Belwin's multiple sites; the opening of Oxbow Trails, a new public hiking area on St. Croix Trail north of downtown Afton; habitat protection and restoration along Valley Creek; and renovations to the Savanna Center, a new program and artist-in-residence site located on a 300-acre oak savanna.

"Conservation is most powerful when it's combined with access and hands-on experience. Success means more kids with dirt under their fingernails and more people who understand what the tallgrass prairie feels like at sunset," says Bloome. "And that translates to more curiosity about wild things, and more people who make nature a priority in their lives."

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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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