



Located in Nelson, Thrive! Park's 25 acres ranges between two bluff tops and includes about four miles of public hiking trails.

Hidden gem — Hiking Thrive! Park offers outdoor outlet close to home

by Beth Kraft

Last week's Buffalo County News featured the story of Ice Age Trail Thou-

sand-Miler Carol Sandberg, who spent about four years checking off various trail sections accompanied by family and friends to achieve her

goal of hiking the trail before her 70th birthday.

But local residents who may be looking for a unique and challenging hiking option a little closer to home can find one hiding in plain sight.

Located in the Village of Nelson just off State Highway 35 via Cleveland Street, Thrive! Park offers free public access, 24/7, to nearly four miles of hiking trails and breathtaking views of the Mississippi River and Lake Pepin.

Thrive! Park is the result of a years-long endeavor by Gary "Chris" Christopherson, who envisioned sharing the 25-acre property with the public in hopes of inspiring a new generation of hikers and nature enthusiasts.

Working with the Village of Nelson, Christopherson

donated the park's property to the Village in 2015—ensuring the property would be protected for public access indefinitely.

One day, the final few acres of the property still owned by Christopherson will become part of the park as well, consisting of his restored late 19th century home and his artist's studio, home to GChris Sculpture.

Today's Thrive! Park is about eight years in the making, consisting of bluff prairie restoration efforts, trail creation work, and other amenities.

The park first opened in October 2016, featuring trails that offer easy hiking to difficult, steep terrain that requires slow and careful navigation. But the view at the top of the Sisters/Lost Broth-

er bluff (named for three "sister" bluffs plus an additional "lost" brother bluff tucked in behind) is well-worth the effort, rewarding determined hikers with a stunning, 15+ mile panoramic view.

Children are also sure to enjoy the park property's fish pond, alive with pan fish and frogs. Just watch out for the resident "alligator."

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Founded by Gary "Chris" Christopherson, who donated Thrive! Park's property to the Village of Nelson in 2015, the park's hiking trails are a labor of love that Christopherson is eager to share with visitors.



A sweeping view from the top of the Sisters/Lost Brother bluff allows hikers to see a miniaturized Village of Nelson below and the backwaters west to the bridge across the Mississippi River at Wabasha.

Thrive! Park - Continued from front

Christopherson first bought the property in 2003, quickly realizing he had his work cut out for him. The home and its two outbuildings, which date back to 1885, had fallen into disrepair over the years and were “of bulldoze quality,” Christopherson said.

Not easily deterred he set about restoring all three buildings, further inspiring efforts to restore the bluff prairies to their former 1800s glory as well.

Utilizing a mix of funding sources, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners Program and assistance from the Hetrick family, large bluff prairies—called Pike’s Peak and the 2 Sisters—were restored to benefit prairie wildlife, including monarch butterflies, grassland birds, and prairie flowers and grasses.

The work involved removing invasives, including buckthorn and burning bush, and keeping prolific plants like cedars and prickly ash in check to allow native species to “reignite themselves,” Christopherson said.

Given the elevations of the park, some of the more difficult work was completed in phases by Ku Le Region Forestry over several years.

“We had them hanging off cliffs,” Christopherson said. “It was quite an effort.”

Before and after photos of “goat prairie” restoration efforts show clear progress in the right direction, and natural oak savannas are coming back.

“Now we’re starting to see this explosion of native plants,” Christopherson said.

Community efforts have also played a major role at the creation of Thrive! Park. In addition to a positive working relationship with the Village of Nelson, which assists with maintenance ac-



A frog rests on fallen leaves in the Fish Pond.

tivities, Christopherson has forged community connections with local Boy Scouts, who created Thrive! Park’s Eagle Trails three years ago.

The project was conducted as part of an Eagle Scout project headed up by Max Benish, a member of Alma Boy Scout Troop #54. Dennis Benish, Max’s father and a troop leader, said a group of 10-15 people, including Boy Scouts and their families and friends, spent several days creating new hiking trails and benches at Thrive! Park.

“Eagle Scout projects are generally something to improve the community,” explained Dennis Benish, noting Max, now a sophomore at UW-Madison, has continued Eagle Trail maintenance activities during the summer months.

Students at Alma High School have also helped out at Thrive! Park by building picnic benches.

A 1966 Alma grad himself, Christopherson grew up near Tell and often went exploring. He has also spent time hiking in various places over the years, including Denali, the Rocky Mountains, and Shenandoah National Park along a section of the Appalachian Trail.

“It’s just being out,” he said of hiking. “You’re just hearing the sounds of the outdoors and focusing on what’s going on around you.”

Following a career with the federal government, running health agencies and creating health policies as a senior executive working in

Washington D.C. for over 20 years, Christopherson moved back to the area in 2012. He was dismayed to discover there weren’t many options for public hiking left in Buffalo County.

“It’s very different than when I was a kid where you could hike anywhere,” he said.

Christopherson envisions Thrive! Park not only as an inspirational outdoor resource, but also as a community-builder.

“We’re getting more people interested,” Christopherson said, but continued involvement and support of the park from the community and additional partnerships will drive its future.

“When I’m not here, it will depend on the community to decide what they want this park to be,” he added.

Christopherson would like to one day see Thrive! Park’s property include the third “Sister” bluff, which was part of the original property prior to 1972. Today it is privately owned.

“It would be really, really nice if we could add back the third Sister and some of the adjacent forest land (about 3-4 acres) as part of Thrive! Park,” he said. “Not only would that bring the Sisters back together but it would provide an easier way to hike between the two bluff tops.”

Prairie restoration work will also need to continue on a regular basis, done by controlled burns and regular cutting.

“We want to see what we

can do to make it better and better as time goes on,” said Christopherson.

His vision for Thrive! Park’s visitors is for them to experience the rustic feel of nature and enjoy the park in different seasons—summer’s greenery, the burst of fall col-

ors during upcoming autumn, peaceful snow in winter, and emerging springtime flowers.

“Each season has its own moment,” he said, expressing a preference for winter hiking at Thrive! Park for its opportunities to view animal tracks and the sweeping view from

the top of the Sisters/Lost Brother bluff that “looks like a classic Christmas card picture.”

For more information about Thrive! Park, please visit www.ThrivePark.org.



The Fish Pond at Thrive! Park is spring-fed and is home to many pan fish. Christopherson has not stocked the pond since 2003 as the fish have proven sustainable on their own. A sign referencing alligators arrived by mistake, but Christopherson opted to use it anyway.



Lake Pepin can be seen in the distance from Thrive! Park’s bluff tops.