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Kids, families big winners in Chamber Parks Challenge

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by Jim Boyle

Editor

The wind, rain and even snow that accompanied spring in April did not keep people from hitting the parks across Elk River, Big Lake and Princeton last month — and for good reason.

The Sherburne County Area United Way and the chambers of commerce from the three communities challenged the public to go out and take selfies of themselves and the families in the parks and post them to Facebook with the chance of winning prizes.

“I thought it was a great idea,” said Dawn Larson, of Elk River, who won a TakeOff Nutrition gift certificate. “It prompted me to get out to more parks than I normally would and to try new parks I hadn’t been to before.”

The chambers gave out weekly prizes that were provided by area businesses, health care organizations and individual cities, and the Sherburne County Area United Way awarded a grand prize valued at \$675 with gifts flowing in from individual cities and businesses.

Amy Thies, of Big Lake, won the grand prize. Big Lake resident Cory Forslund didn't win any prizes himself but he deserves honorable mention as he and his dog Helix went to 11 different parks in Big Lake. Theis and Forslund helped the Big Lake Chamber win the traveling trophy.

The first-time event will likely become an annual one. The chambers in Elk River and Princeton have a score to settle with the Big Lake Chamber.

The pictures that showed up on the local United Way's Facebook page included pictures from dozens of parks, and the subjects often had winter attire on. If you look closely, you might even see snow.

That was one of the reasons for the challenge, recognizing Minnesotans are always ready to get out of the house in spring, especially since people have been more closed in than usual due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Kim Young, the Princeton Chamber of Commerce's executive director, came up with the idea for the challenge after seeing another chamber partnering with a United Way chapter in another part of the country.

"Their's was more of a fitness contest where people would get out and walk and submit their steps," Young said. "The challenge was between mayors from different communities."

Young reached out to Stephanie Hillesheim at the City of Princeton, Kat Sarff from the Sherburne County United Way and Susan Gillson of CrossFit Beyond Sport in Princeton. Things snowballed from there and the chambers in Big Lake and Elk River soon got involved in the planning. They decided to simplify the challenge in order to create a quick turnaround for a spring event. The weather could have cooperated more, but it didn't prevent people from rising up to the challenge.

“The chambers do a lot to support one another in terms of sharing of ideas, but it’s not very often that we come together and promote the same event,” Young said. “It was a lot of fun! It was great to include the competitive piece of it with the traveling trophy. We’re coming for that trophy next year!”

The Princeton Chamber received a \$1,500 Explore Minnesota marketing crisis grant to support community events.

Sarff, who lives in Zimmerman and is moving to Otsego, was glad to see and hear people get out of their comfort zones and try new parks.

“We really are one big community,” she said. “I loved seeing everyone so excited to be outside and to be part of something bigger.”

The reasons people go to parks varies greatly, but one comment will forever stick with Sarff. It came from a woman who told her not many things in life are as healing for her as a simple walk in the park.

“It gave me chills,” Sarff said.

Missy Wilson, a new small business owner in the Elk River area who also won gift certificate to TakeOff Nutrition, loves to run and is a member of the Elk River Running Club.

“It isn’t difficult for me to be present in our lovely parks; however, sharing those fun times with others in the midst of a challenge was even better,” she said. “My house is adjacent to one of the parks in Elk River, so my children are also present in the park on a daily basis.”

Wilson said she anticipates trying out additional park locations as a result of the challenge.

“The Running Club really would like to move around to different locations instead of primarily (using) Woodland Trails and Otsego Park, and this was a good push for us to migrate.”

Jody Henning, of Big Lake, likes parks because they are a free, fun way for her family to take walks, ride bikes and enjoy nature in the middle of her town.

Her family now plans to go on a tour of the parks in neighboring cities this summer.

“There are so many fun places to explore right under our noses,” Henning said.

Briana Sutherland and her family are no strangers to parks. She considers them almost a second home. She said her kids have loved parks since they were toddlers.

“When we saw the contest my kids were all for it and planned out how we could visit as many parks as we could,” Sutherland said. “We won a prize pack from the Princeton chamber that included a monthlong membership to a ninja gym inside Princeton Fitness. My kids will be professional ninjas in a month!”

For the past six summers the Sutherlands pick a group of parks or theme of parks to visit. They’ve visited all the Big Lake, Monticello, and Princeton parks as well as done statewide projects including must-see parks like Chutes and Ladders in Bloomington or Tamarack Nature Center in White Bear Lake.

“We’ve even done (the) best splash pads, which my kids still talk about, and they’ll tell you all about Wabun Picnic Area in Minneapolis being their favorite. This summer we have a new theme picked out that will take us exploring statewide,” Sutherland said.

Area parks will still be on their list, too.

“Each town has so many hidden gems and great resources that it makes exploring easy and enjoyable,” she said.

That’s music to the ears of Sarff and Young. Their biggest question, however, might be which chamber will win the Chamber Parks Challenge traveling trophy in 2022.

