

# Novembers Are Different

## Occasional forays into the off-season

*By Beau Vallance*  
**Current Contributor**

Once a year, I get to pretend that I really live here, that I am not just a Summer Person. Usually that occurs in November, when I drive eight hours north from my ‘real life’ in Indiana to close up our cabin on Crystal Lake for the winter. And while my decades of summers blend together, the Novembers are more distinct. Novembers are different.

Summers in Benzie give us beach days, family conversations in old cottages at all hours, hikes in the woods, kayaking on a placid lake or down a busy river, the Dune Climb, fireworks on the Fourth, cottage projects to complete. It all seems so eternal, so unchanging, all blending into one long memory, punctuated only occasionally by

events that become the stuff of legends: memorable guests, a wedding, conveying our parents’ ashes to the lake, the time we three siblings nearly drowned in a storm off the Elberta jetty. We come here to unwind for a weekend or a week or a month or more, returning home with tales of kayaking another lake or finding yet another trail in the dunes, with awe at the resiliency of a favorite enduring shop or restaurant.



Lake views are larger in November. Photo courtesy of Noah Sorenson.

ferent. November visits do not melt together like summer visits do. Rather, they have clarity. Vivid memories include one Thanksgiving with summer neighbors—now in winter clothes—cheerfully gathered on a cold night; a visit when I discovered that our 300-foot well had died and needed not only a new pump but many feet of new pipes and connections (the cats and I made do, and Shoebridge Well Drilling came to the rescue in a big truck); a concert at the old Life Saving Station in Elberta; meeting friends after a movie in Frankfort, then navigating the drive back to the cottage through a snow storm. One fall (not quite November), I happened upon a Halloween event at the already-spooky old high school in Benzonia, where room after crumbling room had been

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# Benzie’s Decoration Man

## When the holidays arrive, Marley’s decorations thrive

*Jacob Wheeler*  
**Current Editor**

Back when he was a student at Benzie Central, native son Marley Demers got the idea to place Christmas decorations in the school cafeteria. He contacted the food service director, and she approved.

Ever since then, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s, and St. Patrick’s Day have meant family gatherings and delicious meals, and also pumpkins, paper turkeys, pilgrims, Santas, reindeer, evergreens, elves, hearts, leprachauns, and decorated eggs taped to the walls and hanging from the ceilings. When the decorations come down, Demers repurposes them into creative art in “the clubhouse” on the property of his parents, Marty Jablonski and Betty Demers

of Benzonia.

This holiday season, Demers—who turns 28 years old on December 22—is decorating Crystal View Adult Foster Care in Frankfort, Resale 4 Recovery in Benzonia, and the Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities in Traverse City (formerly the Beulah-based Michigan Land Use Institute, or MLUI).

“Marley’s decorations are fantastic, they blow your mind away,” says Crystal View caregiver Judy McGregor. “Our residents really like it! It cheers them up a lot.”

Demers gets his decorations donated from big-box retail stores in Northern Michigan. He does not charge for the displays, but he leaves a donation box at each location.

“I recognize that it’s a bit unusual for a nonprofit advocacy organization to go



A holiday wreath. Photo courtesy of Marley Demers.

all out on holiday decorations. But we figured, ‘Hey, let’s not take ourselves so seriously and have a little fun with the holidays,’” says Hans Voss, Groundwork’s executive director, a former Elberta resident. “Plus, Marley is a real pro. I call him the ‘Holiday Decoration Artist,’ because he really has a special talent and does a terrific job of transforming our regular hallway into a full-on seasonal celebration. Marley is a legit artist—and a heck of a dedicated young man. He is following his passion, and it’s beautiful to witness.”

For the last 10 years, Demers has also made and sold Christmas wreaths. He uses Benzie County’s freshest evergreens and typically sells 100 to 150 of them. They cost between \$25 and \$35, depending on the wreath.

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# Season of (Thanks)Giving

## Community Spirit gives back this holiday season

*By Aubrey Ann Parker*  
**Current Editor**

For her day job, Melanie Herren-Fitzhugh saves lives. In her spare time, she makes sure that people in need are fed, clothed, educated, and taken care of.

A Frankfort native, Herren-Fitzhugh works in the Emergency Room at Paul Oliver as an EMT. She spent a good part of her career riding around in ambulances. After graduating from Frankfort High School, Herren-Fitzhugh traveled around a bit, volunteering at the Salvation Army and other such good-will organizations around the country. During this time, she first learned about the issues facing people who live in poverty. Now she runs her own local nonprofit, Community Spirit Food Source, which she founded in 2004.

For many of us, the season of giving begins

with a turkey-themed meal on the last Thursday in November, ramping up and continuing well on into the New Year. We donate a few dollars to this charity or that, making use of end-of-the-season, tax-deductible donations; we buy a gift for a loved one, a fruit basket for a coworker; we take gently used coats, gloves, and hats to the winter-clothing drive.

But some individuals go above and beyond these one-time seasonal acts, all the while not calling much attention to themselves. Herren-Fitzhugh is humble when talking about Community Spirit, a program of her own creation that hosts three major giving opportunities each year. It is apparent that she feels uncomfortable in the spotlight, as she shifts the conversation to the volunteers or the nonprofit’s board or the work itself.

“It’s just what I do,” Herren-Fitzhugh says of her service. “Everybody does something to give back.”

In the spring, the nonprofit gives more

than \$10,000 in local scholarships to students at Benzie Central High School and Frankfort High School. Over the past five years, they have donated \$80,000 for college and tech schools.

In late summer, Herren-Fitzhugh and about 30 volunteers fill 150 backpacks with personal care items, school supplies, and food so that students at Benzie Academy, Benzie Central High School, and Frankfort High School can start the school year off right. Teachers at each school pick up the backpacks at an event in August and then distribute them to students in need at the beginning of the school year. (Then in December, Herren-Fitzhugh sends extra supplies to Benzie Academy to refill the backpacks.)

And finally, in late fall, Herren-Fitzhugh and a team of 10 to 15 volunteers preps turkey dinners for 70 to 80 local families who otherwise could not afford to splurge on Thanksgiving.

“Glen’s had this wonderful dinner: turkey with all the trimmings,” Herren-Fitzhugh explains. “We started buying some of those for just

for a few clients at Thanksgiving, and it just sort of grew, as most programs do. Our list became longer each year.”

Additionally, “clients,” as Herron-Fitzhugh calls them, can call her for special needs throughout the year; for instance, she may give out a food card every once in a while.

“We don’t do as many [food cards] as we used to,” Herron-Fitzhugh says. “But we have a little bit in the budget, in case somebody has an emergency.”

**Filling A Need**

This is the ninth year of Community Spirit’s Thanksgiving program. Family Fare (previously Glen’s) in Frankfort has a dinner that includes a 10- to 12-pound turkey “with all the trimmings”: potatoes, dressing, rolls, and a bean dish. The food is all pre-cooked, pre-packaged, frozen, ready to re-heat, and eat. Simple.

“I know there is a need here,” Herren-

Please see Thanks on page 2



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# Novembers

Continued from page 1

transformed into scary venues.

In November, our favorite lake views are suddenly much larger—the same vistas are opened up by the total absence of vegetation; the foregrounds are now stark, brown verticals instead of leafy green.

In November, we are saying goodbye for a while. In my little strip of a beach community on the North Shore, only two houses are year-round. The others close down, shuttered, with docks stacked in sections on the beach, boats stored in *real* boathouses, everything battened down for the winter. Those of us with ‘simple’ cottages—ones that are unheated and basic, lacking internet-connected thermostats—have to return at some point to close them down for the winter. We must manually turn off the power, drain the pipes, pour antifreeze down the traps, close the drapes, prop the fridge open, put out mothballs or dryer sheets to deter wild animals from making their winter home inside, and lock up for the winter.

I often bring my cats for this long weekend, and the one year that I had three cats (our little hospice cat was still among us), we all hunkered in the bedroom with a space heater. There is a seven-decades-old cottage in my family, located just down the road, that is closed up each year by the last sibling using it, but I usually check it anyway, confirming that the place is ready for the “four-legged creatures [who] find courage to cope,” as described in my sister’s framed poem at the back door.

November is hunting season. For us Summer People, it is a whole different life. Hiking favorite trails in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, we outfit ourselves in bright orange, and we head onto the trail hoping that hunters do not mistake us for a legal target. Likewise, paddle trips down the Lower Platte often mean coming around a bend in the river to see camouflage-wearing, loaded-weapon-wielding hunters who are lounging against the sand dunes, a stark contrast to the bare-chested, beer-drinking floaters of July.

Since my summer friends are gone by November and I bring few groceries, I usually go out for dinner. It is something special for us Summer People to see our summer towns bravely carrying on into winter. The restaurants and businesses that stay open are heroic and essential, businesses that welcome Summer People during the busy season but can survive without us, too. Despite knowing no one at The Cabbage Shed, it seems more intimate with fewer people around, and I am able to appreciate the value of that place and what it stands for: welcoming in all seasons, now with winter coats. Similarly, the night-time November streets of Beulah and Frankfort are devoid of cars but lighted, looking safe, even cozy.

By November, the Summer People turn Benzie completely over to the locals. But we will most assuredly return in the spring, when it comes time to open the cabin, turn on the power, get the water running, tidy up, and wonder what we missed over the past few months since November.

# Wreaths

Continued from page 1

Every step of the way, the community has supported Demers in his creative pursuits.

“When Marley was growing up in Benzie, his family and friends supported his pursuits without question,” Voss says. “I was a soccer coach at the time and tried to get him to play soccer, but he was interested in making Christmas wreaths, so I bought a Christmas wreath. That’s one of the great things about the Benzie community; they really gather around people and support them. Another one of Marley’s passions, which he picked up from his parents, is Michigan music festivals—it seems he’s a volunteer for all the great local festivals, and he really loves it. He’s following his dreams, and it’s a real inspiration.”

*To buy a wreath, contact Marley Demers at 231-882-4933 or 231-871-1027. The family lives at Llama Meadows Eco Farm on Benzonia's West Street, which intersects with the point in the road where Traverse Street becomes River Road.*

# Thanks

Continued from page 1

Fitzhugh says.

And she is right. According to the U.S. Census, around 11 to 13 percent of Benzie County residents lived below the poverty line between 2010-2015. Moreover, 22 percent earn less than the basic cost of living, according to Benzie Area Christian Neighbors (BACN).

When we look at child statistics, things are even worse. While the situation appears to be getting better after the recession in many states, child poverty has deteriorated in Michigan as a whole over the past decade—in 2008, one in five Michigan children lived in poverty, but by 2013, that statistic had ticked up to one in four. Moreover, Michigan ranks 33rd in child well-being nationally and last in the Midwest, according to the *Kids Count in Michigan* survey, released annually for the past 25 years by the Michigan League for Public Policy.

In a county-by-county breakdown, Benzie County is ranked 29th out of Michigan's 82 counties for child well-being and 20th for child poverty. The actual child poverty rate in Benzie County is close to 19 percent. (Notably, Leelanau County is ranked 12th in the state with a child poverty rate of 15 percent now, compared with 11 percent in 2006; Grand Traverse County was 11.4 percent in 2006 and 14.9 percent in 2015; Antrim County is ranked 36th and Kalkaska County is ranked 62nd, both with child poverty rates above 20 percent.)

## Boxing Up Dinners

Herren-Fitzhugh hopes to provide for 80 Benzie County families this year, just over what she did last year. The turkeys have already been ordered and arrived earlier this month; they are currently being stowed in the freezers at Family Fare in Frankfort. All of the sides will be coming in soon. Once everything arrives, Herren-Fitzhugh and about a dozen volunteers will go to the store's deli on Sunday, November 20, to box up the different parts of the meal.

"It's a nice day, really fun," Herren-Fitzhugh

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Season of (Thanks)Giving

In addition to Community Spirit’s Thanksgiving dinner program, several other organizations and businesses are working to put food on the table and to spread good cheer in Benzie County this month.

**BACN:** Benzie Area Christian Neighbors is currently seeking donations to provide turkeys for area families. Each turkey costs roughly \$25; donations can be dropped off at BACN’s Benzonia headquarters (next to Timberline Campground and gas station) or online at BenzieBACN.org or by mailing a check to BACN, PO Box 93, Benzonia, MI, 49616. Turkeys will be available (while supplies last) for regular food-pantry visits from Monday, November 14, through Thursday, November 17, so plan pantry visits accordingly. In past years, BACN has handed out 200 turkeys at their headquarters. This year, BACN will also have vouchers available for meals from Shop N Save. Call 231-882-9544 if you want to donate or if you are in need of a turkey or a voucher this holiday season.

**Benzie County Fraternal Order of Eagles #3313:** A Thanksgiving dinner is once again being held on Thursday, November 24, from 1-6 p.m. at 71 Lake Street in Frankfort, and anyone is welcome to attend. The Eagles are looking for food donations, as well as volunteers to help with the meal. Call 231-352-9811 with any questions.

**Community Thanksgiving Worship Service:** On Sunday, November 20, join families, friends, and neighbors in giving thanks for the abundance with which we are blessed. Various church choirs will lead singing, while pastors from area churches will lead prayers and readings. The event begins at 3 p.m. at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church at 8190 Lincoln Road, just off US-31 on the top of the hill between Beulah and Honor. Call Dinah Haag at 231-651-0311 or email pastor431@gmail.com with questions.

**Crystal Mountain:** Begin Thanksgiving Day by boosting your metabolism for the feast to come on Thursday, November 24, by participating in the 12th Annual Turkey Vulture Trot 5K run/walk, which is held on a paved, looped course through the scenic, rolling terrain of Crystal Mountain Resort in Thompsonville. The 5K begins at 9 a.m. with a 1-mile fun run following at 10 a.m. Medals will be awarded to the top three male and female finishers of each age group, and the top male and female finishers overall will receive Crystal Premier Season Passes! Cost is \$25 if you register now through Wednesday, November 23; \$30 on race day. The first 100 registrants get a beanie hat. Proceeds benefit Wings of Wonder, an Empire-based nonprofit sanctuary for raptors. Call 888-968-7686 for more information.

**Elberta Village:** The 2nd Annual Thanksgiving Leftovers Party and Solstice Quilt Fundraiser will take place on Sunday, November 27, from 5-8 p.m. at the Elberta Life Saving Station. All are welcome to share leftovers (or just bring yourself) to hear a historical presentation of local interest by Andrew Bolander, a regular on the Benzie Area Historical Museum circuit. Elberta Parks & Rec will provide coffee and soft drinks. The evening will also see the auctioning of the Solstice T-Shirt Quilt, created by Rosemary Tanner and Cyndi Larson. Minimu bid is \$500, and proceeds will go toward ongoing improvements to the Life Saving Station, which you can check out while eating pie. If you would like to volunteer to set up or clean up, or if you have questions, call Emily Votruba at 231-399-0098 or email emilylvotruba@yahoo.com. (Note: This event will test drive the cold-weather rental capacity of the Life Saving Station, which could provide considerable revenue, if feasible.)

**Papa J’s Pizzeria & Diner:** This will be the ninth year that Papa J’s will offer a free Thanksgiving meal to anyone who is in need of one. The restaurant’s doors will be open from 12-3 p.m. on Thursday, November 24, at the Honor location in the Honor Plaza, just off US-31. If anyone feels the need to make a donation—although this is not necessary—feel free to do so; all donations will go toward purchasing toys for Toys for Tots.

**Petals & Perks:** Everyone is welcome to share great food and engage in wonderful conversation during a Thanksgiving community dinner at 209 Main Street in Frankfort from 12-2 p.m. on Thursday, November 24. Enjoy turkey and all the trimmings, plus Hill Top Soda Shoppe ice cream and homemade desserts! Co-sponsored by Bayside Printing, Jowett Family Funeral Home, Shop N Save, and Sweet Souls Catering. Seating is limited, so call 231-352-4800 to RSVP or if you want to volunteer. Dinner is free, with donations accepted.

**State Savings Bank:** “Basket of Thanks” is a food drive going on now through Monday, November 21, with the intention of feeding hungry families this Thanksgiving. Canned and non-perishable food items can be donated during bank hours at 703 Main Street in Frankfort and 11470 S. Leelanau Highway (M-22) in Empire. Donations will be sorted and divided up into baskets that will be given to area families; State Savings Bank will contribute a turkey to each food basket. Call 231-352-9691 or 231-326-4003 for more information.

**Stormcloud Brewing Company:** Saturday, November 19, has been declared National Frankfort, Michigan, Turducken Day. Enjoy from 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.

says. “People bring their families, little kids. We put everything in really nice boxes that are easy to carry.”  
Herren-Fitzhugh, in her reverent nature, makes sure to mention that Family Fare employees contribute to this effort by culling

Eagles. They help to fill the need. There are people here who have young children, people who are working and struggling—as long as I have the funds, we’ll do as many dinners as possible.”

items as they come in throughout the month of November, giving up valuable space in the store’s freezers, and imparting a discount on the cost of the meals.

For every \$45 that is donated, Community Spirit can donate one meal to a family in Benzie County this holiday season. Those people in need of a meal just have to call Herren-Fitzhugh to request a meal voucher. Families can then take these vouchers to the Family Fare Deli to pick up their meal at a time that is convenient for them, as long as it is during store hours.

“It’s easier for everyone involved,” Herren-Fitzhugh says. “That way, not everyone has to come at once; they can come whenever they choose.”

Sometimes, though, she admits that she will go the extra mile and pick up a meal box to take it to the family, if that is easier for them.

“I just want everyone to have a nice Thanksgiving,” Herren-Fitzhugh says. “And there is so much food that you’ll have leftovers; that’s the good part. It’s not just one day, it’s a really nice meal!”

When asked if she is worried about the program growing beyond capacity, Herren-Fitzhugh says that she is not too worried,

“If it got to be too much, we would just do as many as we could,” she explains. “But there are others around the area who are doing good things for Thanksgiving, too: BACN, Petals & Perks, the

I implore each of you out there in Reader Land to think about donating this (thanks)giving season. If you can not donate the entire price of a meal, maybe split it up with people in your family—for instance, last year, each person in my family donated just \$5, and we were able to donate three meals to families in need in Benzie County. Can you spare \$5 this fall?

*Donations can be made until November 20 by calling 231-383-2606, emailing MEL0138@yahoo.com, or mailing a check to Community Spirit Food Source, PO Box 333, Frankfort, MI, 49635. Or you can stop by the Family Fare deli to pay for a meal there, and Community Spirit will make sure that it gets to a family in need.*

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The Betsie Current

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The Betsie Current is a free tabloid, published 12 times this year and distributed throughout Benzie County. Advertising inquiries, comments, suggestions, critiques, articles, photos, poems, and letters are welcome. © 2016, The Betsie Current, all rights reserved. www.BetsieCurrent.com

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