

Memories on the water

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, Progress, Feb. 24, 2024

A New Year's resolution, a pair of friends, water and a calendar — these are the things that start the story of a tradition that Nikki Lee and Shannon Highland will share for a lifetime.

Lee was thinking about the number of activities available during Minnesota winters compared to the summer. She set out to find something she enjoyed in the summer, and do it all year — in every season. When she was talking to Highland about it, kayaking came up as an option. They agreed and set a New Year's Resolution to get into the water and kayak once a month.

"Both of us were kayakers before we started this endeavor," Highland said. "We would go kayaking together and apart for several years before we made the commitment (together)." In January, the kayaks hit the frigid water and the two completed their first run of many to come.

How many months were to come? As of December 2023, there had been 60 consecutive months of kayaking.

From hot summer days, drizzling rain, snow, ice and wind, the duo has stuck to the commitment. The coldest day, they say, was memorable not only because of the below zero temperature, but also because it was Nov. 11, and it was -11° outside. The kayaking may have been a little shorter, but it was still another month of getting on the water.

Lee and Highland have had the opportunity to take friends and family along on some of their adventures, which is something they agree is always a welcome addition to their outings. "We've had some good ones, even from Alaska, but we always really like it when our dads join us," said Highland.

"I agree with dads!" Lee added. Another favorite guest to bring along is their significant others.

"When our significant others joined in winter once on their paddle boards ... That was interesting!" said Highland.

Recalling the list of people that have shared a run or two with them brings so many stories and priceless memories to mind. Lee said, "I also really enjoyed our friend Patrick (now passed away). He usually flipped his kayak and had an ever-famous quote: 'This is my home now,' as he floated in the water."

Highland added, "Patrick flipping every time he kayaked with us also brought hilarious tears every time! I'm pretty sure he actually disliked kayaking, but just came to appease us."

Both women agree having their friend Ju as a co-kayaker is always a good time. "Ju, she's always up for whatever type of adventure we have planned," Lee said.

Highland agreed, saying, "Probably the same with Ju. I don't know how much she actually likes it, but she's willing to go!"

While a couple names stand out, both Lee and Highland agree that they love all of the guests who have joined them.

The pair have kayaked in rivers, lakes and snow together. Highland has even kayaked in the ocean when the opportunity has been presented. They have had too many great times together to name a favorite. And though every time they go is a new experience, there have been a few instances that have stood out.

Lee said, "One of the worst, but also one of the best, is when at the tail end of a 10 mile paddle, we entered Red Lake to find strong winds and white caps heading our way. We weren't really making any progress in moving forward so we befriended a man in a boat who tossed us a ski rope and pulled us in our kayaks across the lake. We are still waiting for the photos."

There have been a couple accidents for the kayakers; two to be exact. One accident resulted in losing a kayak. The kayak has never been recovered. (They would like to add that it's a green kayak, if anyone reading this has found one.) Along with two accidents, there has been one broken bone, but that was while loading the kayaks after they were done.

"We've had peaceful floats, bizarre floats and scary ones. We've experienced a great connection with nature and all the elements," said Lee.

Highland said, "The best part is by continuing to do this monthly, we are guaranteed to hang out at least once a month! Life gets busy, but you have to make time for friends!"

The women say they have engaged in deep conversations, laughed until they cried and have just sat and enjoyed the silence together. There has been holiday kayaking and themed kayaking. There was even a year of kayaking under full moons. "One of my favorite things to do while we kayak is to reminisce about all the fun trips we've had — there have been many!" Lee said.

Highland and Lee don't know when this long trail of rides will come to an end. They will keep going indefinitely as long as it works. Even after the adventures end, the friendship is cemented in a solid foundation of memories and experiences nobody else can relate to. It is their story; and what an incredible story it has become.