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Volunteers band together to save retreat center

Joe Winter | Nov. 7, 2011

Madison, Wis. -- Local volunteers are trying to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to save a multifaceted, 37-acre retreat center put up for sale by a religious order and a Catholic college.

Volunteer organizers say the financial and logistical scope of the effort to preserve Durward?s Glen, 35 miles north of Madison, is probably unlike anything else undertaken in the country; and it?s all being done by volunteers.

The center, deep within the bluffs of Devil?s Lake State Park, includes a historic chapel, religious shrine, artist?s cabin and 124-year-old stone house.

The core group of 10 volunteers -- who have incorporated and set up a board of directors -- worry that their facility would go to a developer, who might raze the site. Bernard Isaac Durward, a devout lay Catholic who was a poet and artist, started the center almost 150 years ago. The owners -- the Order of St. Camillus in Milwaukee and the College of St. Mary Magdalen in Warner, N.H. -- cited changing conditions for deciding to sell it a couple of years ago.

Volunteer Pam Quinlan said, ?There is no other place like this. It is the holiest place you will ever see. The people are amazing who sustain this.?

The volunteer work is nothing small: Twenty-five hours a week are required just to clean the rooms. Shoveling snow is also a major chore, Quinlan said.

The initial sale price for the center was $1.5 million, but the volunteers bought it for $360,000, of which $250,000 is a loan that must be repaid.

The group raised more than $60,000 in less than a half year, and the center already has 24 weekends in 2012 booked.

?I think it?s a gift from God,? said Mardell Krejchik, 60, the center?s unpaid director. She noted that despite its beauty and serenity, the center is only five miles from Interstate 94 and the Wisconsin Dells resort area.

Krejchik added that the fact the center is Catholic is crucial to her. It is dedicated to Mary with a chapel made of hundreds of stone blocks and a picturesque statue.

The group would like to see a retired priest offer to live on site. There are Tuesday morning Masses and regular historic tours, Quinlan said.

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