

SPIRIT

The Leelanau School Magazine

Visionaries and Voyageurs
FALL 2026

Visionaries and Voyageurs



For nearly a century, The Leelanau School has depended upon two kinds of people: visionaries and voyageurs.

The visionaries are easy to spot. They are the individuals who looked at education differently and imagined something that did not yet exist. They believed that young people who struggled elsewhere could flourish in a community built on trust, belonging, curiosity, and individualized support. They challenged assumptions, ignored conventional wisdom, and created a school unlike any other.

But vision alone is never enough.

The voyageurs—those hardy travelers who carried people and provisions through difficult country—understood that worthwhile destinations require effort, resilience, and courage. Every generation of Leelanau students, faculty, parents, trustees, and alumni has been asked to do the same. Building and sustaining a school dedicated to students who want to learn differently has never been the easy path. It requires persistence, sacrifice, and a willingness to venture where others may not.

This issue of SPIRIT celebrates both traditions. Within these pages, you will find stories of innovation, creativity, generosity, and determination. You will meet members of our community who have imagined new possibilities and others who have done the daily work of turning those possibilities into reality.

Together — they remind us that The Leelanau School is not an accident of history. It is a living mission that has been carried forward, year after year, by people who believed it was worth the journey.

Today's students are beneficiaries of that legacy. They learn in classrooms built by earlier generations. They receive support funded by donors they may never meet. They benefit from traditions, opportunities, and acts of generosity that began long before they arrived on campus.

And so the story continues.

Whether you graduated decades ago or only recently joined our alumni family, you are now both a beneficiary and a steward of this remarkable institution. The responsibility of carrying Leelanau forward belongs to all of us. May these pages remind you not only of where we have been, but also of the journey that still lies ahead.

Shine On!

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Way Finding

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Our Mission

The Leelanau School ignites a passion for learning in a boarding school environment where students thrive by engaging academically and celebrating everyone's unique learning styles in a culture of acceptance, preparing for successful and meaningful lives in higher education, careers, citizenship, and service.

Beyond Here, There Be Dragons

There are moments in every school year that resist ceremony. They are not about applause, photographs, or formal speeches, but something quieter—the accumulation of ordinary days that only in retrospect reveal themselves as transformative.

This is a story worth telling: breakfasts eaten in haste or silence, assignments stretched late into the night, awkward conversations that became necessary ones, and small victories that felt enormous in the moment. It is laughter that made no sense outside the community that created it, walks across campus in every kind of weather, frustrations endured, and recoveries quietly earned.

A thousand small moments become a year. And a year becomes a life in formation.

For many students, the journey to Leelanau begins with disappointment, anxiety, loss, or the feeling of not quite fitting elsewhere. Yet students and educators soon find themselves together in a shared experiment in becoming.

What follows is rarely comfortable.
It is always transformative.

In living and learning together, disagreeing, forgiving, and occasionally driving one another entirely up the wall, a community leaves fingerprints on its members. Some become habits, some values, and some stories that endure long after departure. This is the real work of education—not the avoidance of difficulty, but who we become through it.

It is here that an old phrase takes on new meaning: Beyond here there be dragons.

Used by early mapmakers to mark the edges of the known world, the phrase was never only a warning. It was also an invitation. Beyond the familiar lay uncertainty, challenge, and discovery.

The unknown is alive with possibility.

Leelanau life is full of uncertainty, but also opportunity for growth, self-awareness, and joy. The dragons are often internal: fear, doubt, complacency, and the temptation to settle for easy answers. Courage is not the absence of challenge, but the willingness to learn, reflect, and move forward anyway.





Education is not only about acquiring knowledge, but also understanding oneself through the process of learning. Experience shapes thought. Struggle builds resilience. Reflection deepens understanding. What remains is not the diploma, but what it represents: relationships formed, confidence earned, resilience strengthened, and the experience of being known.

Perhaps the purpose of a school is not merely to prepare students for the world, but to send them into it more awake than they arrived—more attentive, more compassionate, and more willing to question.

The world ahead will not be free of dragons. But neither was the journey that shaped them here.

Gladly, they will not face the dragons alone.





THE LEELANAU SCHOOL

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Today's Visionaries

The most influential educators are not those who provide all the answers. They are the ones who ask thoughtful questions, challenge assumptions, and inspire students to think more deeply. They encourage people to seek understanding rather than settle for easy conclusions, to explore different perspectives, and to develop the confidence to think for themselves.

In a world filled with "influencers" eager to tell us what to think, Leelanau's teachers, mentors, and students model a different kind of influence. They invite all of us to be curious, discerning, and reflective. Rather than asking for unquestioning acceptance, they encourage inquiry, evidence, and understanding. Their influence is not measured in followers or clicks, but in the lives they help shape and the independent thinkers they help become.



Cris Pina retired from Leelanau in June 2026, after eighteen remarkable years as a Learning Specialist and student advocate. He spoke at Graduation 2026:

"Whether you've been here four years, three years, two years, or one, you've changed. The funny thing is that growth often happens so gradually that you hardly notice it—one day you look back and realize you're stronger, wiser, kinder, and more capable than you once were.

But you are still you. You're becoming a better version of you... good humans in the making. Each of you has your own gifts, challenges, quirks, and stories. Inside every one of you is intelligence, creativity, curiosity, compassion, resilience, humor, and yes, a little messiness. That's part of being human. The goal isn't perfection, it is growth — keep learning, challenge assumptions, ask questions, push boundaries. Take thoughtful risks. Make mistakes and learn from them. And remember this: If you think you're the smartest person in the room, you're probably in the wrong room."



The Leelanau School community lost beloved alumnus, longtime Board Chair, and enduring steward of Leelanau, Bob McNutt '55, on December 28, 2025.

"Often and affectionately known as 'Mr. Leelanau,' Bob embodied the spirit of this school in the quietest and most meaningful ways. Through decades of unwavering commitment and generosity, he helped shape the culture, values, and sense of belonging that define Leelanau today. His influence is woven into the fabric of our community and lives on through generations of students who found confidence, purpose, and joy here, many supported by the Bob '55 and Sukie '56 McNutt Scholarship.

Bob was unfailingly kind, gracious, and supportive of faculty, staff, students, and families alike. With a reassuring smile and quiet confidence, Bob created space for hope and possibility. He made people feel safe, valued, and seen, and in doing so, modeled the very best of what Leelanau aspires to be."

— Rob Hansen, Head of School



Excerpts from four-year senior Z Phan's Valedictorian Speech.

I remember being a twelve-year-old [in Texas] who just received the email about an extra two weeks of spring break due to COVID-19. Those two weeks turned into an entire school year online, and I was friendless, afraid, and lonely. "Now I am eighteen years old with many friends, and I am afraid to graduate because that means I will leave my wonderful life at Leelanau. The hardest part of graduating from the Leelanau School will be finding a way to mention it in every conversation I have for the rest of my life...

I love my life. I love my classmates. I love my teachers. Reconnecting with all this nature has been so healing, and giving up smartphones for over a year cleansed my mind. The world is beautiful. Blow a dandelion. Take off your socks and shoes and go play with dogs in the crystal-clear Crystal River! Make a great snowball and hurl it at a friend. Get a tick, and pluck it out with your own fingers. Watch the sunset. Isn't it amazing to be alive?"



The Leelanau School Board of Trustees: JP Larkin ‘87 Bill Winslow ‘58, Bruce Hood, Tricia Denton, Peggy Miller, Mary Beth Hardwicke, Norm Wheeler, Joan Conway, Elizabeth Blondia, Jack Simermeyer ‘20, Gretchen Knoblock ‘82, Lisa Pappas ‘82. Not shown: Armen Vartian and Skip Maner ‘85.

Our Board of Trustees

"One of the great privileges of leadership is the opportunity to help shape a future larger than ourselves. At Leelanau, we share a vision of a school where every student facing challenges—whether from anxiety, bullying, learning differences, illness, or other disruptions—has the opportunity to rediscover confidence, connection, and hope. Unlike many schools, Leelanau creates the time, space, and support for young people to rebuild, grow, and find their path forward. It is transformative work, and I have seen firsthand the profound difference it made in my nephew's life."

In honor of Leelanau's Centennial in 2029, my husband and I have made a Centennial Scholarship pledge of $300,000, spread over four years, because we believe deeply in this mission and in the students whose lives are changed here every day. Our own family's experience showed us the power of a Leelanau education to alter the course of a life. I invite you to join us on this journey. No matter the size of your gift, we can ensure that future generations of students have access to the guidance, opportunity, and sense of belonging that make Leelanau such an extraordinary place."

— Mary Beth Hardwicke, M.D., Chair of the Board

The future is not inherited; it is created—together.

100
THE LEELANAU SCHOOL



Skip Maner ’85 joined the Board of Trustees, bringing more than 35 years of experience as an entrepreneur, private equity investor, and business leader. A General Partner at NewSpring Capital, Skip offers deep expertise in strategic growth, organizational development, and financial stewardship—along with a lifelong appreciation for the formative impact of his Leelanau experience.

Learning Without Walls

“Learning is not a place we go, but a way to move through life.”

In true Leelanau School tradition, classrooms this past year stretched far beyond the campus’s academic building. Learning unfolded along the Lake Michigan shoreline, in the clear blue waters of the Bahamas, inside a submarine, and beneath a canopy of stalwart pines.

Students explored, cooked, and shared the food and culture of the Spanish-speaking world, transforming meals into lessons in language, tradition, and human connection. They created artwork intended to be shared and sold to our Leelanau County neighbors, discovering firsthand how creativity, entrepreneurship, and community intersect. On the slopes of Crystal Mountain, they pushed through winter conditions and built resilience the hard way—outside, together, and moving forward one run at a time.

During Winter Term, a team of faculty and students quite literally forged ahead, building their own working forge and teaching themselves the fundamentals of blacksmithing from the ground up. Heat, hammer, and repetition became their curriculum. Students studied stewardship by practicing it, helping protect piping plovers in Sleeping Bear National Lakeshore and clearing months of blowing sand from the Dune Climb walkways so that others could enjoy and access this treasured place.

Our community also welcomed elementary students from The Pathfinder School to the Lanphier Observatory, opening a window to the universe as they captured breathtaking images of the Pleiades star cluster.



These experiences remind us that some of the most enduring lessons cannot be confined to four walls. When students learn by doing—when they paddle, forge, serve, create, observe, and explore—they discover that education is not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but the practice of becoming. At Leelanau, we believe education is richest when it is lived: when students test ideas against experience, contribute to something larger than themselves, and come to understand that learning is not a place they go, but a way they move through life.





Stepping into something brand new

Meanwhile, the Class of 2026 shaped their own learning during Senior Seminar, digging into topics of personal interest. Their work ranged widely—from WWII history to the impact of tea on Chinese culture, from the tools and practices of firefighting to the techniques of Renaissance painting.

Across the year, learning stayed active, hands-on, and rooted in experience. Students didn't just study subjects—they entered them, worked inside them, and came away changed by them.





"My time [at Leelanau] has been a wild mix of emotions. Once I finally became acclimated to its people and environment, I began to understand that this place might be worth toughing out and seeing what might come next. Being here, I would spend most of my days around people, always having new things to do and learn. I would always have friends everywhere that I would turn to. I loved being able to do such hands-on learning classes that let me interact with the things I was learning about. And even inside the classrooms, every class was so immersive and entertaining to be in. Being here, I've made amazing friends and have been taught incredible skills."

— Fischer Copeland '26, Salutatorian and 4-year senior



Lessons from the Lakeshore

One of the greatest gifts of a boarding school education is the realization that some of life's most enduring lessons arrive through relationships.

Current students and alumni will tell you that the friendships formed at Leelanau are built through ordinary moments: shared laughter in the residence halls, encouragement before a performance or exam, difficult conversations after misunderstandings, late-night study sessions, and the quiet decision to stand beside someone during challenging times. In these moments, young people learn how to trust, forgive, advocate, compromise, and care. They discover that belonging is not something we stumble upon; it is something we create together.







INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Teachers, advisors, mentors, and residential staff all help guide that process. They challenge students to know themselves more fully and to consider what it means to live well alongside others. But adults are not the only teachers here. Classmates teach patience. Roommates teach flexibility. Friends teach loyalty and honesty. Peers often hold up mirrors that help us better understand who we are and who we hope to become. They celebrate our successes, challenge our assumptions, sit beside us in disappointment, and remind us that asking for help is an act of courage rather than weakness.

At Leelanau, we celebrate a community of people who have shaped each other. Every success carries the fingerprints of friends who offered encouragement, adults who provided guidance, and peers who inspired one another to keep growing. Long after students leave Leelanau, many will forget the details of assignments and schedules. But they will remember the friend who sat with them when they felt alone. The advisor who listened without judgment. The roommate who taught them patience. The teacher who believed in them before they believed in themselves. These are the lessons that endure.

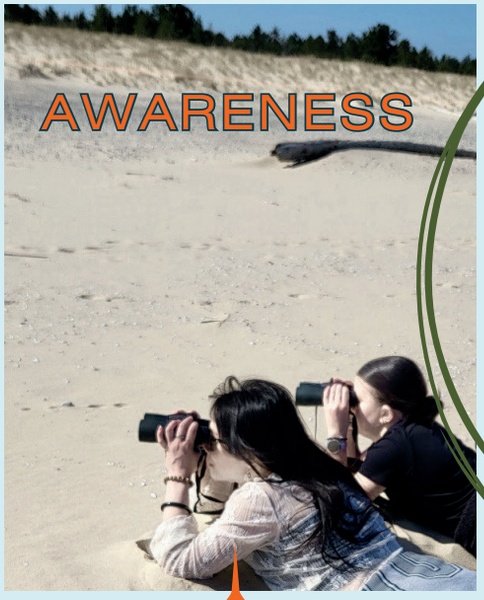
In the end, perhaps the most important education a boarding school offers is this: how to live in community with empathy, self-awareness, gratitude, and courage. How to show up authentically for ourselves and generously for others. How to build relationships that sustain us long after graduation.

Those lessons travel well. And they last a lifetime.









LEELANAU SCHOOL CORE VALUES





Guiding the Voyage: The Avant

An avant, seated at the bow of a voyageur canoe, serves as both guide and guardian. They read the waters ahead, set the cadence that keeps the crew moving as one, and watch carefully for hazards along the way. Like the faculty at The Leelanau School—and the leaders we strive to cultivate within it—the avant understands that the journey is not about racing ahead alone, but about helping others find their rhythm, meeting challenges with courage, and reaching distant shores together.





"The Leelanau School is such a privileged place to begin a career in education because you're expected to learn through experience just as much as the students are. In a boarding school, you can't step away from a hard moment—a difficult interaction, a tough day in class. Living alongside your students pushes you out of your comfort zone and asks you to own your humanness. Every experience becomes a chance to learn—and then a hundred chances to choose better the next time... Leelanau teaches you how to do that: to remain hopeful and patient, to keep offering resources and chances even when they're refused, and to have real, honest conversations with teenagers."

— Avery Kostrzewa, Res Life Instructor



"Leelanau students are authentic, creative, bright people who are courageous enough to want something different for themselves. They come from families who love and know their kids and who recognize that life doesn't start after high school. Our kids are living their lives right now, among the trees and along the shore, within a community of adults who love and believe in them."

— Provost Becca Dymond



"I think that one of the greatest privileges a teacher is afforded is time. Time to observe the growth and transition of a very young human in the making into young adulthood. Time to establish relationships not restricted to just academics, but explore curiosities, different points of views and perspectives, testing boundaries and learning from positive experiences as well as from not so ideal experiences. Time to model courteous, respectful and easy communication with peers and adults."

— Cris Pina, Learning Specialist (newly retired)

"Yesterday, during the quiet period in the Dining Room, the sun was shining, the sky was blue, and the room was full of light and color. Our mindfulness centered around being in that room, one of the most iconic spaces on campus. Unchanged for many years, and the hundreds of Leelanau alum who have been in that space, all the people who have started the last semester of their senior year in that space looking at those trees and that river. Interconnectedness is not just with the people you see, but with generations who have come before you."

- Michael Jarvis, Dean of Students





"Teaching history and English is all about making connections - with the text, with the past, with various cultures, with different perspectives, and most importantly, with each other. If I can teach my students to respect all of the above, and they can go out into the world and do the same with everyone they encounter, I'll be happy."

— Elizabeth Blondia
Humanities Department Chair

Beautifully Different

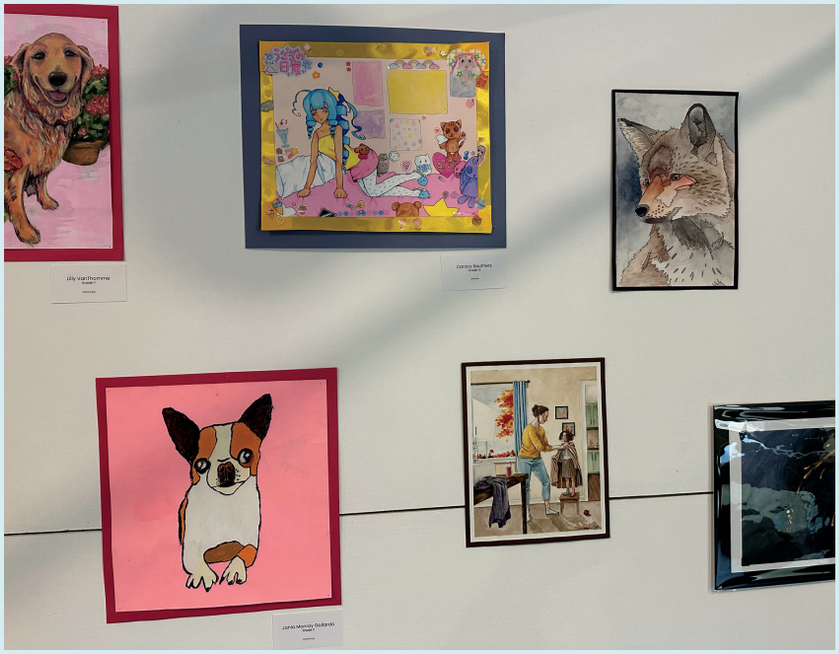




Our Imaginary Beings

Last fall, Leelanau's Creative Writing and Spanish students explored identity through imagination, creating original beings that reflected three defining aspects of their personalities. Crafted from words, imagery, feathers, and wire, the resulting self-portraits were insightful, whimsical, and uniquely their own. The collection was showcased during the Fall Arts Collaborative exhibition.

The evening also celebrated the talents of Leelanau's visual and performing artists. Guided by Elara Coleman and Nathan Rogers, students shared their work with confidence before an enthusiastic audience of classmates, teachers, and parents, turning the Auditorium into a celebration of creativity, self-expression, and personal vision.







Creative talents shone this year, with work featured in exhibitions at Crooked Tree Arts Center in Traverse City, and pieces created during the Bahamas "Barnacles and Brushes" course reflecting the beauty, wonder, and inspiration of learning abroad.

Leelanau was honored to host "Exposures," a Leelanau County exhibition celebrating the creativity of K–12 student artists.

In May, Leelanau musicians took to the lawn at Cherry Republic, sharing their music with the local community, while our student artists sold their work at the second annual Artist Market.

And faculty serenaded Mr. Pina at his year-end retirement party. Bravi!






1925
1975


Pearl



OUR NORTHERN STARS

Every voyage requires people willing to imagine what lies beyond the horizon and invest in the journey ahead. We are deeply grateful to the visionaries and voyageurs whose generosity continues to shape the Leelanau experience for today's students and those yet to come.

The following pages recognize the individuals, families, foundations, and organizations whose gifts, made between July 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026, helped move our mission forward and chart a bold course for the future.

LEADERSHIP & CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN GIFTS of $10,000 and above

Anonymous
Robert and T Boles - Faculty Professional Development
Charlevoix County Community Fdn - Bob and Sukie McNutt Scholarship
Joan Conway - Centennial Scholarship Support
Mike* and Rhea Dow - Bob and Sukie McNutt Scholarship
Richard and Hope O'Quinn Hana*
Drs. Mary Beth Hardwicke and Bob Provenzano - Centennial Scholarship Support
Andy* and Julie Maner - Maner Family Scholarship
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AUDITORIUM GIFTS - PHASE I

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Anne H. Magoun Fund
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Mike* and Rhea Dow
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JD Friley
Kathy Plum Gaffke* '59
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Jim and EJ Winslow

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Donna Welch
Norm and Mimi Wheeler
Bill* and Francie Winslow in memory of Hans Schuler
Dr. Elizabeth Wolterink
Callie Yax* in honor of Janet and Richard Nawrocki
Donald Zeder*+
Bruce Zimmerman*
Bob Zimmerman Jr.*
Barbara and Gerard Zyren

Charting the Course for 100 More!











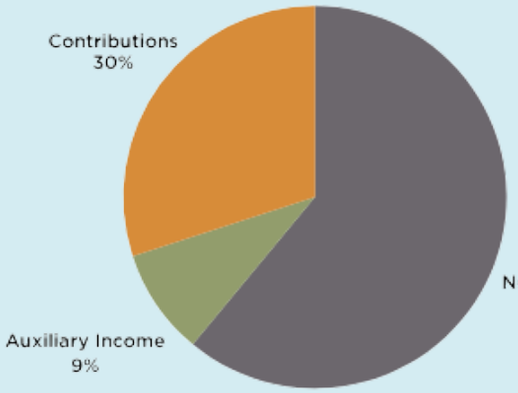
This year, your generosity created opportunities, strengthened community, and helped chart a bold course for the future.

Your support completed Phase I of the Auditorium renovation, transforming the space with modern lighting, sound, and projection for students and the wider Leelanau County community. Memorial gifts to the Bob and Sukie McNutt Scholarship Fund opened doors for deserving students, while Faculty Wishlist donations enriched learning experiences across campus. A leadership gift to the Centennial Campaign also invested in our greatest resource—our people—providing professional development that allows Leelanau's faculty and staff to learn, lead, and share our distinctive approach to education.

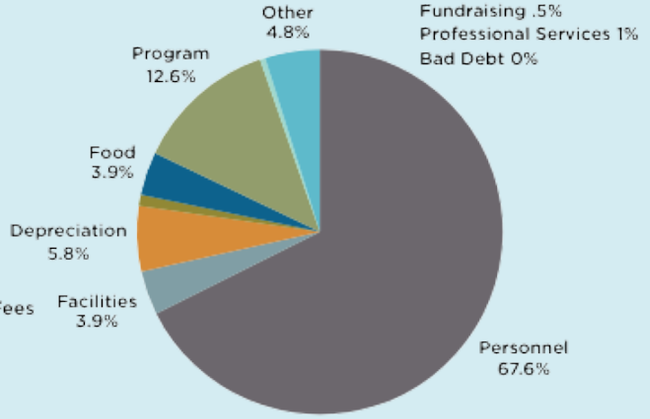
Every gift creates a ripple. Together, you are expanding opportunities, strengthening our community, and ensuring that Leelanau remains a place where young people discover their strengths, find their direction, and launch lives filled with purpose and promise.

FY26 Income and Expenses

Operating and Other Income = $2,461,507



Operating and Other Expenses = $2,914,598



GIVE TO THE Leelanau School Centennial Campaign



CAMPAIGN PRIORITIES

Help us raise $5M by our Centennial in 2029

Scholarships

GOAL: $2.75M - With your support, we can offer more financial aid and scholarships to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds who want to experience **A Better Way to Learn** at the Leelanau School.



Endowment Fund

GOAL: $1M - We invite you to help us establish a general Leelanau Endowment Fund, which will help to promote long-term financial stability and well-being for the school.

Debt Elimination

GOAL: $1M - We seek to eradicate the remnants of a decades-old debt that has saddled the school's finances for far too long. The school has significantly reduced this debt over the past 10 years. It is time to be rid of it.

Staff Development

GOAL: $25K - We invite you to invest in what makes Leelanau exceptional: **our faculty and staff**. Your gift toward our professional development will help us to continuously improve and enhance our learning environment and community.



MAKE A GIFT

1 Old Homestead Rd | Glen Arbor, MI 49636

(231) 334-5841

www.leelanau.org/vision

ON THE HORIZON





MARK YOUR CALENDARS

ALUMNI REUNION

Friday, June 18 - Sunday, June 20, 2027

We'll See You There!

"I most remember Leelanau as an extended family where I was called upon to be my best and was surrounded by nature's bounty." — Leigh Willmore '65





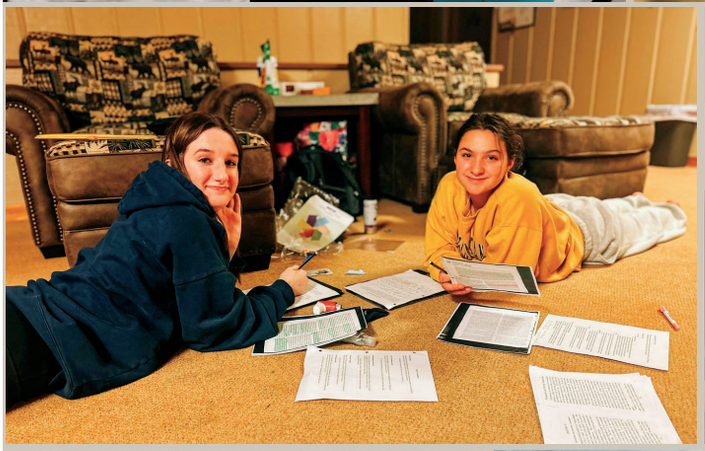
Milestones and Magic

Every voyage is marked by defining moments: reaching a long-awaited destination, discovering unexpected beauty along the way, and finding companions who make the journey worthwhile. At Leelanau, growth happens through both the milestones we achieve and the magic we experience together. These snapshots of school life reflect the joy, connection, and self-discovery that have guided our shared journey for nearly a century.

















Voyageur:
The Hero's Quest



In every epic tale, there is darkness before the dawn. The Gods face moral dilemmas and impossible tasks as they reach their final destination. In Marvel movies, Iron Man and Thor must confront emotional and nefarious demons before saving the world. At Leelanau, the Voyageur canoe trip is our own Underworld passage—a long, often punishing quest through hardship that leads to transformation.

"AP Chem doesn't get you ready for life," admits Head of School and Chemistry Teacher Rob Hansen. "This canoe trip does. It's the best lesson plan we have."

Dean of Students Michael Jarvis, a veteran of the Voyageur journey, casts it in mythological and cinematic terms. "The students are never ready for this trip. It's not a walk—or a paddle—in the park. Leadership is no longer just intellectual; it has become a physical necessity. In the first act of this quest, they fall apart. It rains. It's cold. Dinner is twelve miles downriver. However, resilience drives the plot forward—teamwork, grit, and looking out for one another. That's what allows them to transform, to rise in act two. Most of the time. Not always. And that's why we paddle in September—so our seniors still have eight months to grow into their hero's ending."







"Everyone must believe in something.
I believe I'll go canoeing." **- Henry David Thoreau**

Climbing into a Small Boat



The Future of Education Isn't Bigger. It's Smaller.

For decades, education has chased scale. Bigger schools. Bigger systems. Bigger promises powered by technology.

But adolescence has never responded well to efficiency. Teenagers don't become confident, self-aware, and resilient through optimization. They grow through relationships. Through consistency. Through communities small enough for adults to notice and peers to care.

At Leelanau, students are known. Not by an identification number or a data point, but as whole people with strengths to celebrate and challenges to navigate. Teachers know when a student finds their voice in class. Advisors notice when someone seems overwhelmed. Friends encourage one another before performances, after disappointments, and during difficult conversations. In a small boarding school community, no one moves through life unnoticed.

As artificial intelligence changes how information is accessed, the purpose of education is shifting. Knowledge is increasingly available everywhere. What matters most are the qualities technology cannot teach: judgment, empathy, self-awareness, perseverance, and the ability to live well with others.

Those skills are cultivated through experience. Through shared meals and shared responsibilities. Through meaningful friendships. Through adults who challenge students while also providing the support they need to grow.

Choosing a small school is not stepping away from the future. It is choosing the environment in which young people are most likely to flourish.

Because the future doesn't need graduates who simply know more. It needs young people who know themselves, care for others, and have the confidence to contribute meaningfully to the world around them.

Sometimes, the biggest gift a school can offer is being small enough to help every student discover who they are meant to become.



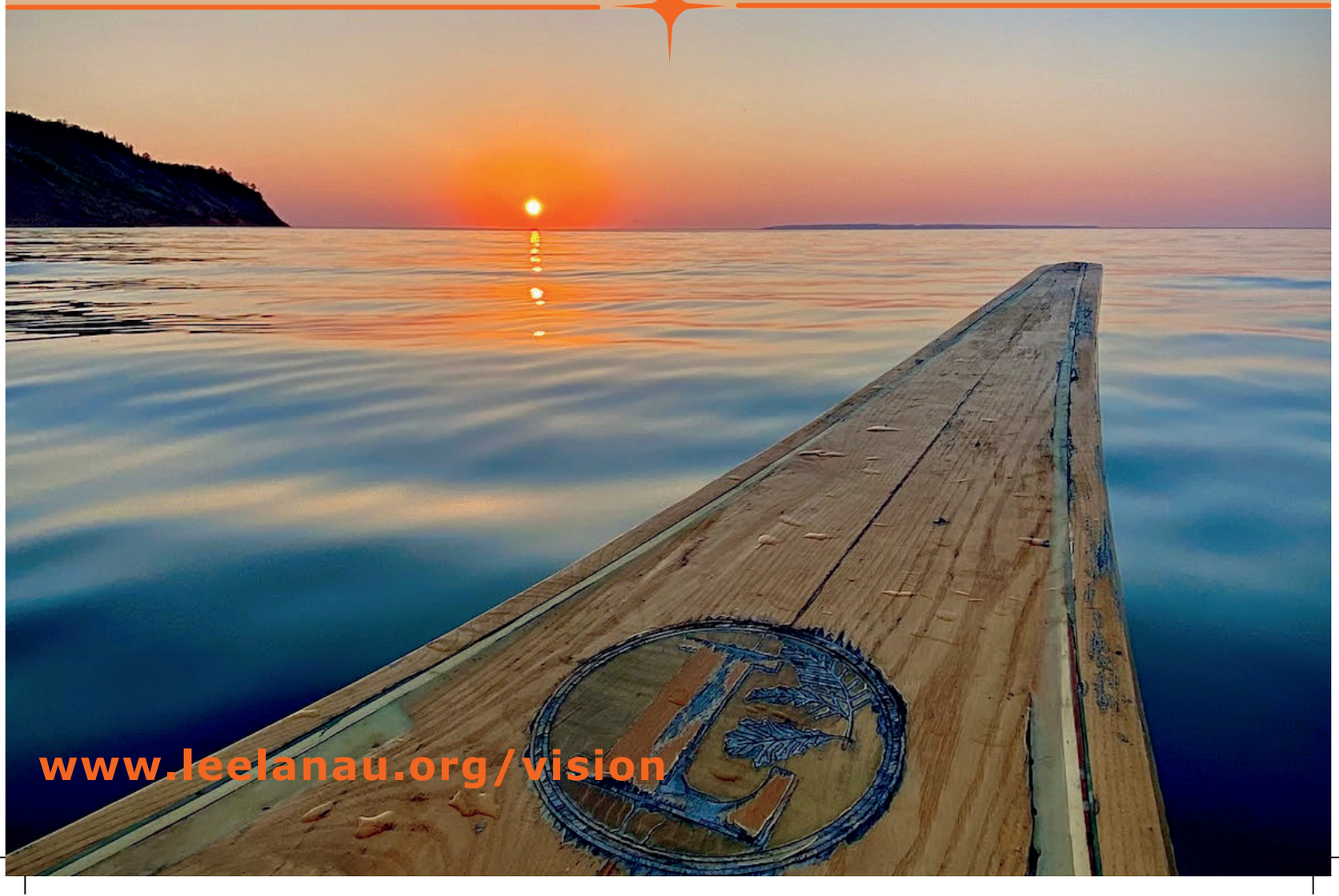
Explore Admission Opportunities

at leelanau.org/admissions or connect directly with Head of School, Rob Hansen, to schedule a campus visit and learn more about admission and financial aid options:

Rob Hansen, Head of School
rhansen@leelanau.org | 231.334.5834

THE
LEELANAU
SCHOOL

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