

James Vaughan

HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE

Jim Vaughan became a Frost Valley lifer as an adult. His first love was Camp Manito-wish, a YMCA camp in Northern Wisconsin. Jim's family had a place nearby and his uncle had gone there, and his grandfather was friends with the CEO so, as he puts it, "I had to go."



After a first year of standard-issue homesickness, though, he was hooked. He spent many, many years as a camper, a counselor, even hauling the garbage. Just an hour south of Lake Superior, the camp is set amongst 1,400 lakes and much of Jim's time there was spent on trips, canoeing. He says, "my favorite trip started up in the Upper Peninsula in Michigan and went down the whole length of the Wisconsin River, till we peed in Iowa."

Jim journeyed to the East Coast to attend college at Wesleyan University. After a couple of years in the Navy, he got his MBA from Columbia and established himself as a New Yorker. He spent much of his career at the investment firm Cain Brothers. Around the time he joined Cain, Jim began casting about for a way to make a meaningful social and educational impact. He felt that he was just "a slug" in New York City, as he puts it, so he reached out to the YMCA to see how he could help. Not surprisingly, given the reputation of Frost Valley and its visionary leader D. Halbe Brown, the Y pointed him toward the innovative, bustling, and growing camp in the Catskills. Halbe wisely invited Jim to make the drive up from the city to see the place with his own eyes one memorable autumn day, full of dazzling oranges and reds. Jim Vaughan joined the Frost Valley Board in 1995.

Well, if Jim was dazzled by Frost Valley that first day, after which began nearly thirty years of service in which we would be dazzled by him—his vocal support of inclusive new programs, his personal generosity, his

utter modesty, his eloquent advocacy for focusing on practical and seemingly minor matters and decisions long before they could become existential threats.

Although he spent his first years learning the ropes and becoming what he describes as “a whip” for Board President Fenn Putman—“Fenn wore the white hat,” Jim recalls, “and I wore the black”—he was in fact inevitably our next leader. When Fenn’s health began to fail, Jim’s role as a Board leader became increasingly central. For several years he had led the Committee on Trustees and thus had helped bring on new members. In 2012, Jim became Board President and served in that role for 8 years, stepping down at the end of 2020. He remains an active trustee, inspiring others through his example and his words to deepen their commitment through a unique approach of voluntary service: that rare combination of persuasion, commitment to mission, and humility.

In 2017, Jim was presented with the Eric Blum Volunteer of the Year Award—given to him in recognition of the extraordinary time he has spent supporting Frost Valley and for his consistent devotion to the aim of serving every child and every family. That devotion in recent years has been amplified by his active participation on regional and national Y committees and initiatives. He has led his trustee colleagues in an ongoing animated discussion of what exactly “for all” means as the Y’s and in Frost Valley’s missions progress.

We honor him today because of the extraordinary commitment he’s made to Frost Valley over nearly 30 years. Jim and his wife Bobbi do not have their own children; his work at Frost Valley has enabled him, as he puts it, to “have a positive impact on kids and families.” What does this place mean for kids? The answer Jim knows well from witnessing camp in action and from his own experience dating back to summers at Manito-wish: “I always thought camping was a way to learn who you are.”

To remind us all of this, among the many large and small, symbolic and practical ways in which Bobbi and Jim have given generously to Frost Valley, is a plaque Jim commissioned some years ago. The sign hangs off a tree near Adventure Village. “Show me your friends,” it says, “and I’ll show you your future.” Could there be a more perfect distillation of Frost Valley magic? We honor Jim for his deep understanding of the magic—and for, in so many ways, setting that magic into action.