

Two times a neighbor: reconnecting with Fermilab



I am not a physicist, scientist, or any other "ist" that I can think of, but Fermilab has been a recurring theme in my life. It began as an interesting footnote back when my husband and I became a couple, and unexpectedly jumped back into our lives 31 years later.

Let me explain. In 1978, a soon-to-be married young couple buys a house off Batavia Road in Warrenville, Ill. They drive every day by this huge facility surrounded by lush green lawns and landscaping on their way to and from their jobs in the Chicago area. They can't see the actual facility, but they know that inside it, some pretty smart folks are performing studies incomprehensible to the average person. They hear that physicists are shooting energy around a huge, underground circle four miles in diameter.

Yep, that was pretty much the non-scientific explanation for Fermilab back in our earlier days, one we pondered with our neighbors during our Friday night happy hours. Fermilab research was way beyond our scope of understanding, but it was fun to talk about after a few cocktails, when we got so much smarter.

When my husband and I were transferred in 1980 to downstate Illinois, we thought our connection to Fermilab had ended.

Now fast-forward 22 years. The young couple is still a young couple at heart. In 2000, they exit their corporate careers and relocate to northern Minnesota to start a new life as resort owners. Living on the Ash River Trail near the entrance to Voyageurs National Park and hosting anglers, hunters, and snowmobilers seems much more fun than holding down corporate careers.

We are so remote in our part of northern Minnesota that cell phones don't work; high-speed DSL lines don't exist; and the local phone company tells me we're darned lucky to have phone service at all.

A few years into the new millenium, we heard that the University of Minnesota and Fermilab might want to expand their neutrino search to the Ash River Trail. Scientists with the NOvA experiment hope to study the behavior of neutrinos generated at Fermilab in Illinois and sent through the ground to a detector here.



Wow, pretty cool. Once again, the local bars were buzzing with lively discussion about particle physics. No one could describe exactly what the scientists would be doing (most of us still can't), but we had lots of positive reactions to the new development coming to the Ash River and what it would mean to the local economy. (By local, I mean maybe 7000 folks, most employed in tourism or logging.) We were thrilled when in 2009 the NOvA project got its funding and we had a groundbreaking date of May 1.

Once again we find ourselves neighbors with Fermilab, even though we moved almost all the way to Canada! How bizarre is that? The laboratory has a much bigger impact on our lives than it did 31 years ago. As resort owners, we have housed or fed University of Minnesota scientists, Fermilab scientists and employees, staff from the nearby Soudan Underground Laboratory, and construction workers developing the NOvA site. These folks are far removed from the typical angler or snowmobiler we have seen in the past 10 years and have created new business opportunities (and revenue) for us and for other businesses on the Ash River Trail. In October our community typically gets very quiet until the November deer-hunting season. Not this year: We are lucky to be housing several construction workers, hosting project meetings in our dining room, serving spaghetti suppers to visiting dignitaries, and hosting celebratory pizza parties. We are discussing how to meet the NOvA project's lodging needs over the next three years and beyond, when visiting scientists will come to Ash River from all over the world.

Our bar conversations take a more intellectual bent when we have scientists and other staff around. Some of us can now even describe what a neutrino is and why we care about them. We are thinking of putting in our cabins a short description of neutrinos and the NOvA project to address the frequently asked question, "What is going on down the road?" A year ago, we never dreamt we would be brainstorming business opportunities related to the project. Thank you, Fermilab! You make great neighbors, once again.

Deb and Steve Wieber and their son, Tom, are owners of Ash Trail Lodge in Ash River, Minn. In their pre-resort life, Steve was in sales for Hewlett-Packard and Deb was a corporate training and development consultant.

Photos courtesy of Deb Wieber