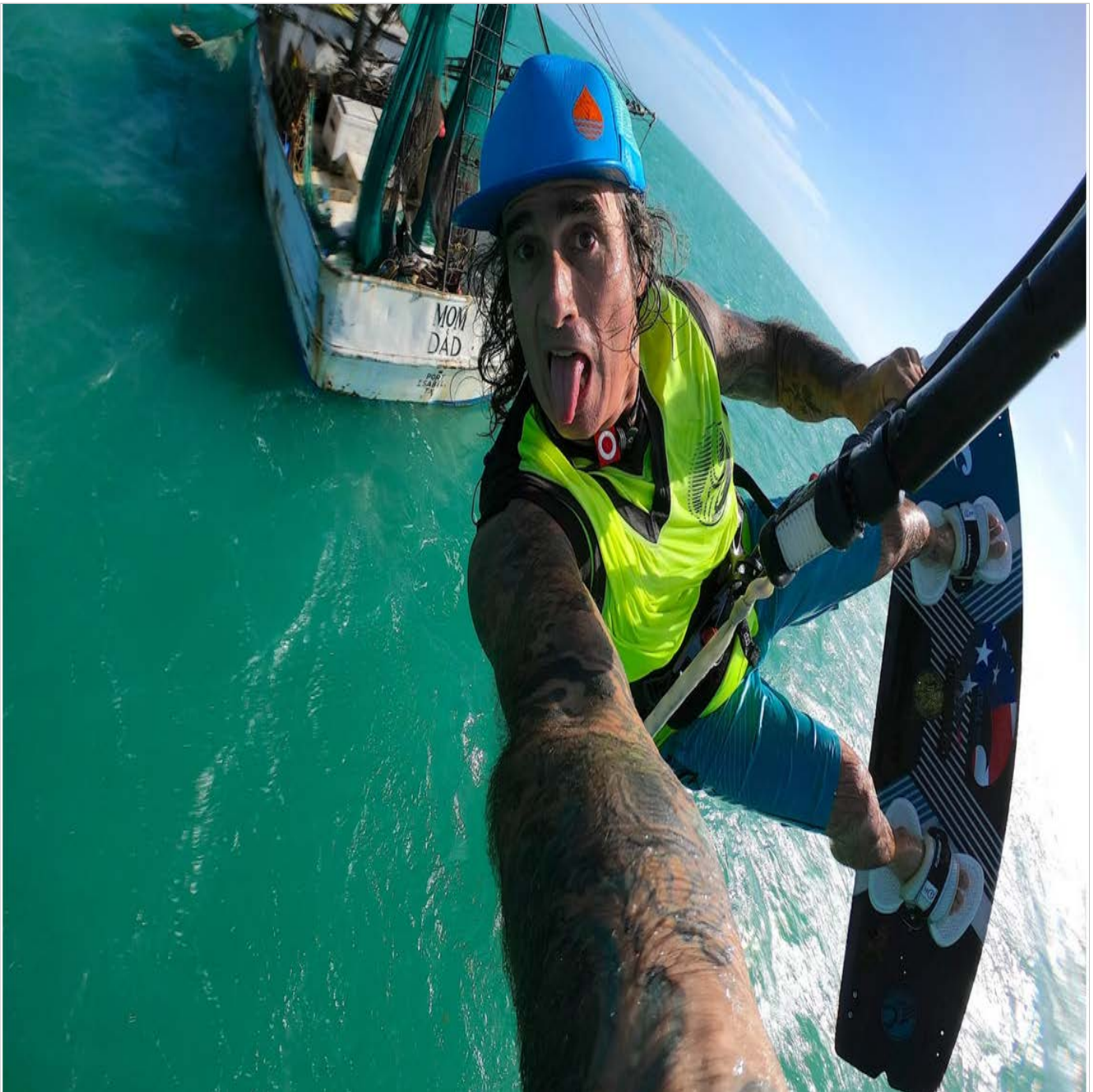


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Buoys at Key West, Northwest Angle lead to fundraising drive, potential for future collaborations

Wondering if there was anything Key West could do to help people at the Angle, Paul Menta came up with the idea of a fundraiser to benefit kids in both communities.



Paul Menta, an extreme sports enthusiast and entrepreneur from Key West, Florida, is organizing the fundraiser for Key West and Minnesota's Northwest Angle, which both have buoys commemorating their locations as southernmost and northernmost points in the contiguous U.S.
Contributed / Paul Menta

By Brad Dokken
July 16, 2022 06:30 AM

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ANGLE INLET, Minn. – As a longtime resident of Key West, Florida, Paul Menta was helping to plan an upcoming 39th birthday celebration for the island’s famous buoy at the southernmost point of the contiguous U.S., when he discovered a similar buoy exists on Minnesota’s Northwest Angle.

The Key West buoy was constructed as a tourist attraction in 1983, and the buoy at the Northwest Angle, which is about the same size, was completed in May 2017.

That got the wheels turning, said Menta, a self-described kiteboarder, author and chef, and owner of Key West First Legal Rum Distillery. He’s also speaker of the house for the “Conch Republic,” a local group the mayor of Key West at the time founded in 1982 and who created the southernmost buoy the next year.



The Southernmost Point marker in Key West, Florida, is a must-see for tourists.
Gwen Filosa/Florida Keys News/Miami Herald/TNS

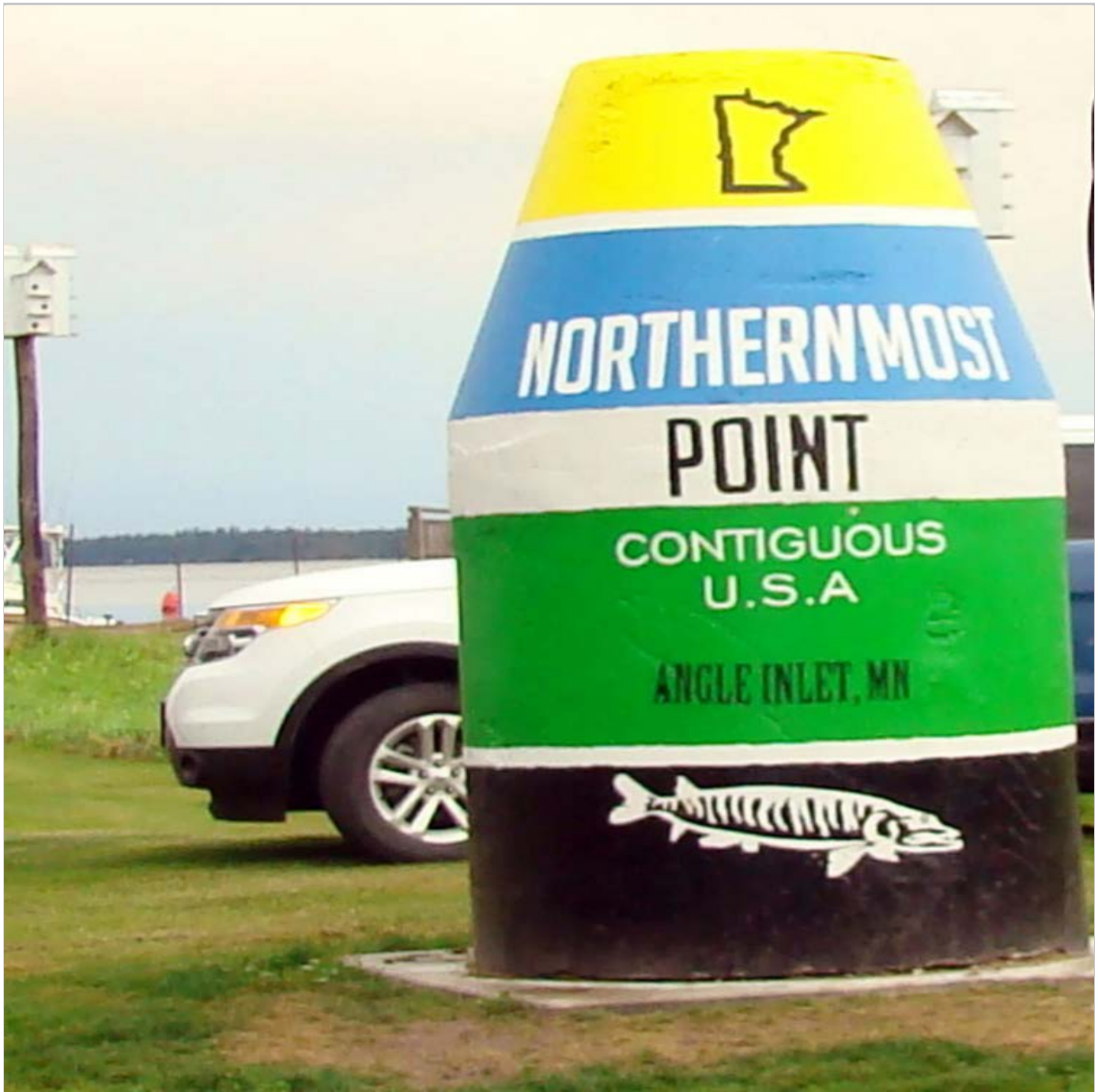
"I'm like, 'Angle Inlet, where the hell is that?'" Menta said. "I looked it up and I'm like, 'Wait a minute. You've got to cross into Canada to get into this place. This is incredible, I've got to get in touch with somebody up there.'"

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That proved to be a challenge at first, Menta recalls, but when all else fails, call the local bar. He eventually reached out to staff at Jerry's Bar and Restaurant at Young's Bay on the Northwest Angle mainland, and they steered him to Joe Laurin. A Flag Island resident, Laurin is a Lake of the Woods history buff who developed an app of Lake of the Woods landmarks in 2018.



A monument at Young's Bay of Lake of the Woods signifies the Northwest Angle's location as the northernmost point of the Lower 48 states and is designed to resemble a monument at Key West, Florida, the southernmost point of the Lower 48.

Brad Dokken / Grand Forks Herald

Laurin gave Menta the lowdown on the Northwest Angle buoy, which is yellow, blue, green and black. The Key West buoy, by comparison, is mainly red, black and gold.

"I just wanted to know the history and when did this thing get started and why did they pick those colors," Menta said. "That was my initial thing, and then when I found out more, I just became

consumed with it."

During the course of their conversation, Menta says he asked Laurin how people at the Angle had fared through the pandemic and the U.S.-Canada border closure, since tourism drives the economies in both areas.

The impact, he learned, was devastating, and widespread flooding this summer on Lake of the Woods has caused further hardship for people at the Angle.

Wondering if there was anything Key West could do to help people at the Angle, Menta came up with the idea of a fundraiser to benefit kids in both communities.

Thursday, July 14, Menta launched a GoFundMe page, "Southernmost Buoy 39th Birthday Family Fundraiser," with the goal of raising \$8,000. Proceeds will go toward kids at Samuel's House, a homeless shelter in Key West, and for purchasing sports equipment for the Northwest Angle school.

There will also be other fundraising opportunities as the campaign develops, Menta says.

"I thought this would be a good opportunity to kind of give a little help to the North," he said. "It's really wild that we can do something good with celebrating our 39 years of having this monument that brings us tourism.

"Sometimes, things find you, and this (fundraiser) with Angle Inlet is just perfect with that. Like wow, this is what's going on, people are struggling a little bit and we have this common thing. Let's give you a hand."

The fundraiser will continue through Sept. 10, Menta says, after which he and his wife, Crystal, will visit

the Northwest Angle to see the area for themselves.



Paul Menta of Key West, Florida, stands in front of his rum distillery in this undated photo. Menta was organizing a 39th birthday party for the popular buoy in Key West when he discovered that Minnesota's Northwest Angle has a similar buoy. That set the stage for a fundraiser Menta is organizing to benefit kids in both communities. Menta and his wife, Crystal, also plan to visit the Northwest Angle in September after the fundraiser.

Contributed / Paul Menta

They'll fly to Fargo and rent a car for the 4½-hour drive to the Northwest Angle, where the average

September high temperature is 65 degrees and the average low is 53.

"I asked what the weather would be like in September, and that's where I started getting some surprises," Menta said. "I was like, 'Oh, that's the high? That will be refreshing.' "

During their visit to the Angle, Menta says he and his wife hope to see some of the landmarks featured in Laurin's Lake of the Woods app, including old gold mines, pictographs and sites of German prisoner of war camps.

"I've been a professional kiteboarder for the last 20 some years and do a lot of extreme stuff. I'm on the water all the time, I've been to 59 different countries and I'm like, 'This is going to be a neat one,'" Menta said. "I can't ever say this was even on my radar. We're actually really excited to go up there, meet everybody and go around and check out all these really cool things."

Already, the fundraiser is generating quite the buzz in both communities.

"I think it will be great," Menta said. "I've spoken to nieces and nephews and kids in town, and the kids in town want to get involved to help the kids up there because there's that little symbiotic kind of thing.

"Even though there's a way bigger population, we're still only on a 4-mile island, so we kind of get how it is up there."

Laurin, the Flag Island resident and developer of the Lake of the Woods app, says the fundraiser and Menta's upcoming visit could lead to a long-term relationship between the northernmost and southernmost points of the contiguous U.S.



Joe Laurin, of Flag Island on Minnesota's Northwest Angle, stands in front of his home, the Flag Island Lighthouse, in September 2018. Laurin has been working with Paul Menta of Key West, Florida, on a fundraiser Menta has launched to benefit kids in the two communities, both of which have buoys designating their locations as southernmost and northernmost points in the contiguous 48 states. Brad Dokken / Grand Forks Herald

"People often talk about having a sister city, like someplace in Europe or Norway, when you're talking about Minnesota," Laurin said. "I think that maybe this could be our sister city, where you have Key West and the Northwest Angle that are tied together more so than ever over this event."

It's also a good news story in an area where good news has been in short supply because of the

ongoing pandemic and the flooding, Laurin says.

"I think it's just nice that they're reaching out to us," he said. "We're kind of bonding as two little communities. They have a lot of tourism but so do we, and I think it's going to be interesting – especially what his take on it all is when he gets up here.

"I'm sure the relationships will build and you'll see more people. It will be a quest to have a picture next to each buoy."



