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Canaan Institute offers year-round opportunities to exercise

by Olivia M. Hall, Correspondent

“Make friends while you move!” could be Mike and Raylene Ludgate’s motto. For some fifteen years, the couple has been bringing outdoor enthusiasts together three times a week to mountain bike, hike, cross-country ski, and socialize under the umbrella of the Canaan Institute.

Starting from the “club house”—a cozy workshop by their home that also houses weekly fiddling jam sessions and the occasional concert—the Ludgates lead small groups of regulars and new participants on tours of nearby Hammond Hill State Forest, varying their activity by season.

They announce their outings through a listserv with nearly 700 subscribers, of which at least 100 make it to the various exercise events each year.

What compels the couple to offer their time, space, and skills for free to both friends and strangers?

“I grew up in a household with an agriculture-related business and a farm store (Ludgate Farms, sold and then closed a few years ago),” said Mike Ludgate. “When we were kids, my dad was very friendly to strangers, very welcoming. At various times we had people there living in little yurts in exchange for weeding or working in the store. I grew up in an atmosphere of a constant influx of well-educated and interesting people. I’m trying to keep that going.”

The Canaan Institute is named in this spirit. While “Canaan” has historical significance to the group’s neighborhood (and is not used as a religious reference), “Institute” grew out of the Ludgates’ desire to share their skills with others while having fun.

It all began over a decade ago when Raylene bought her husband a mountain bike. Quickly bored with riding alone, he invited friends along. “We started building a little group and coming up with a schedule” he said. “Every time I met somebody new, I just kept adding them to the email list. At first we rode mostly on black top, but at some point someone said, ‘hey Mike, you live right by a big state forest, why don’t we go ride our mountain bikes in the woods, like mountain bikers do.’”

Soon the budding group added cross-country skiing to stay active through the winter, and hiking to bridge the seasons. “When we were younger and maybe a little more foolish, we would just keep biking until the snow got deep, but there are some safety

hazards,” Mike recounted. “After one of my friends fell mountain biking at night in November and broke his upper femur, we’ve been a little more conservative.”

Participants value this safe and non-competitive atmosphere, where people ranging in age from their twenties to sixties find common ground. “We don’t feel we have to out-do anyone,” said Marilyn Dispensa, who has been joining the Ludgates a couple of times a week throughout the year since 2005. “No one is ever left behind because they are too slow. Mike’s safety-conscious and always urges people to have lights at night, and he sometimes has walkie-talkies during the night skis.”

Nick Trier, a firefighter EMT and friend of the family who started coming to mountain biking sessions earlier this summer, agreed: “We’ll bring in any skill level, help you along, give you pointers if you need them. It’s just overall a lot of fun.”

Though Trier slows down his usual mountain-biking speed to ride with the Canaan Institute—on his own he climbs hills at 10 miles an hour or more, while with the Ludgates “it’s a little more tame”—he commits to at least two outings a week.

“I like the social aspect of it,” he said. “When I’m out riding by myself, there’s no one to talk to. Here, there’s always a good group of people and a good topic of conversation.”

Lest anyone think the Canaan Institute’s rides are uneventful, he added: “We have a couple of different mud holes that are named after people because they slid their bikes sideways and ended up swimming in.”

“It’s a lot more fun to exercise with friends,” Mike Ludgate concluded, “and we’re much more likely to do it when people show up for a bike ride. We can’t just blow it off that day.”

Regulars like Marilyn Dispensa, conversely, appreciate that they “always count on the Canaan Institute hikes to happen year-round and don’t really have to think about it. (This way) we also get to enjoy all the seasons in the forest and look forward to the different flowers and foliage.”

These are the subject of occasional themed hikes, frequently led by Raylene, who works as a youth education coordinator at Cornell Plantations.

Even when biking is on the schedule, Mike often stops to point out wildflowers, mushrooms, birds or trees. “I’ve always been a bit of a naturalist,” he explained. “Plus, I think that if you’re going to exercise outside in the woods in a natural area, you need to understand and appreciate the ecology of where you are in order to better preserve and protect it. It bothers me when I see folks who just think of a state forest as a personal playground. It’s way more than that.”

In keeping with this attitude, stewardship of Hammond Hill State Forest is an important part of the Canaan Institute’s activities. “A lot of people don’t realize it, but (the state

forest) isn't managed like a park," Mike said. "There are no state employees that go out there and take care of the trails."

Instead, the Institute's participants join other outdoor groups such as the Cayuga Nordic Ski Club or Cycle-CNY for annual trail maintenance sessions, and they are encouraged to remove obstacles such as fallen trees whenever they come across them, year-round.

This shovel and hoe work in the fall gets the multi-use trails ready for the Canaan Institute's best-attended activity, cross-country skiing, something that Raylene Ludgate is eagerly anticipating.

"Cross-country skiing in the dark with the snow falling is my favorite," she said. "The snow absorbs the sound, it's a magical quiet. Especially in a certain kind of snow that coats all the trees, everything is white, it's just such a beautiful time, and I guess a time that you don't often get out."

This winter, as every year, Raylene and Mike are looking forward to sharing this magic with their friends, old and new, through the Canaan Institute.

Additional information

Canaan Institute

FOUNDED: ca. 2000

MISSION: Get people outside, having fun and exercising together.

MEMBERS: about 100 active, 600-700 on listserv

ONLINE: canaaninstitute.org or cinst.org