

Messenger Bits from the Messer-Brandenburg Chapter



January 2026

Winter

Co-President's Message

We hope all of you had a great holiday season and we wish you a Happy New Year. Regardless of the cold weather, we look forward to a healthy 2026 and the opportunity to get together with our fellow Y Alumni members.

In this newsletter you will read about some recent chapter get togethers. These include a Veteran's Day gathering in Utica, Illinois and three Holiday gatherings in Rockford and Darien, Illinois and via zoom for our Wisconsin members.

Thank you to everyone who has renewed their membership. We look forward to seeing you at some of the events that are being planned for the coming year.

Yours in Service,

Wray Howard and David Phelps
Chapter Co-Presidents



Board Members

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|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Cathy Adams</i> | <i>Linda Dean</i> | <i>Jim Furrie</i> | <i>Rick Gattoni</i> | <i>Denny Handrow</i> |
| <i>Wray Howard</i> | <i>D'Ann Lagerblade</i> | <i>Denny Mohrman</i> | <i>Pat Nelson</i> | <i>David Phelps</i> |
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Y Alumni Messer Brandenburg Chapter

Membership Update

Our Annual Chapter dues are \$50 for both Individual and Household memberships. As of 1/16/26, we have a total of 66 Individual and Household units that total to 104 members. We have had two new Household membership units join this year so far. They are **Valentin and Valerie Castaneda** who live in Buffalo Grove, IL and **Sabrina and Peter Lepka** who reside in Freeport, IL. Welcome to all 4 of you!

If you haven't already, it is time to renew your Alumni membership. Renewal can be done online at <https://www.ymcaalumni.org/re-connect>

Messer Brandenburg Events

Veteran's Day Gathering

Eleven Y Alumni members met at the Starved Rock Lodge and Conference Center on Friday, November 14 for our Annual Veteran's Day gathering. Those in attendance included Steve Dahlin, Rich Escutia, Linda Dean, Cathy Adams, David Phelps, Deb Allen, Ken Buss, Wray and Sue Howard and Denny and Cindy Mohrman.

The group enjoyed a sharing session in the Great Hall near the stone fireplace. Later we moved to the Porch Room for our lunch. Following lunch, the group shared memorabilia they had saved from their "working days" at the YMCA. What a wonderful experience reminiscing about "the good old days"!

Members also enjoyed visits to the Starved Rock gift shop and tea room for special items such as fudge and wine.





Illinois Cluster

The Illinois Area Y Alumni from our Messer-Brandenburg Chapter met on December 3rd at Chuck's Southern Comfort Restaurant in Darien, Illinois. There were a total of fifteen in attendance. Cathy Adams organized a couple of games which everyone enjoyed participating in as we visited before the meal. It was great to meet in person again this year!



Wisconsin Cluster

The Wisconsin Area Y Alumni from our Messer-Brandenburg Chapter had planned to meet December 10th but was cancelled due to weather concerns. Fortunately a zoom call was held and even though it wasn't the same, we still had a good time getting caught up and visiting with everyone.

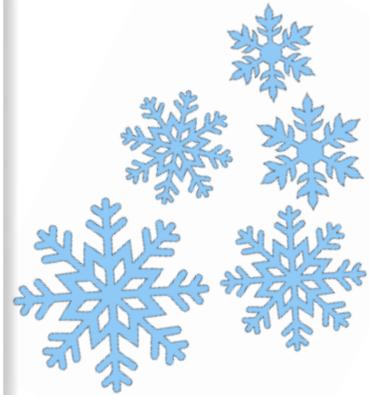
Alumni Events Continued:

Rockford Alumni

The Rockford Y Alumni and many Rockford retirees with more than 20 years of service met on December 12th to celebrate the holiday season.



Chicago area Alumni met for lunch at Manny's Delicatessen January 2, 2026



Front row: **Fred Matthews, Jean Thigpen, Steve Dahlin.**

Back row: **Cathy Adams, Kathy Clark, Dorothy Burns-Hicks, Linda Dean, Liz Andrews**

Upcoming Events:

YMCA Alumni 2027 Reunion

Hard to believe, but planning has begun on the 2027 National Y Alumni Reunion. The Midwest Region will host this always fun event. Each chapter in the midwest region was asked to appoint two members to a committee that will help plan the event which will be hosted somewhere in the midwestern part of the U.S. Ken Buss and Denny Mohrman have volunteered to serve on that committee. We will keep you updated as the site and dates of the 2027 event are announced!

International Opportunities with YMCA Alumni

This summer, three Y Alumni members served as volunteer camp counselors in Stary Plzenec, Czech Republic on behalf of the YMCA Alumni International Service Corps (ISC). ISC provides opportunities for Alumni members to use their expertise and critical skills to benefit YMCAs internationally.



(L-R) Alena Wenker, Kim Decker, Lenka Simanova (Director), Laura Kamperman

The day camp was an English immersion camp where 55 kids participated in fun activities while practicing their English skills. The camp theme was “Mystery of Old England” where the campers participated in group challenges, craft projects and mystery-solving activities based on the time of King Arthur.

Alena Wenker from Tennessee, Kim Decker from New Jersey and Laura Kamperman from Kentucky enjoyed leading activities, reminiscent of their former YMCA camp days, that inspired fun and laughter while encouraging the use of English and sharing cultures.

The local Czech newspaper said, “This year’s camp had a special sparkle, thanks to three amazing women from the American YMCA – Kim, Alena and Laura. From the very first morning their smiles and energy filled the camp with warmth and excitement. They didn’t just teach English – they lived it alongside the kids. They didn’t just lead – they played, laughed, and listened.”

Listening to campers is an important part of serving as a camp counselor but particularly when listening to 15 of the campers who were from Ukraine but living in the community away from their fathers and older male siblings who are serving in the Ukraine military or were not permitted to leave their country. The camp provides the children of those families an opportunity to play with other children while learning two languages: English and Czech.



Alena Wenker

“It was fun to watch the changes in the children,” says Wenker. *(Continued on next page)*

“The first day, they really didn’t interact with us very much, but that changed with every hour. By the third day, there was hardly a minute when we were not asked to play a game or asked about our cities or our lives,” she says. “The younger campers, and kids with only basic English language skills, brought their friends to help translate. The camaraderie among campers and counselors was impressive,” she adds.

Kim, Alena and Laura created an exchange office The campers could only speak English in order to make their exchange.

Decker said she witnessed remarkable growth in the campers as they practiced English. Her greatest takeaway was the joy of being in a place where children run free and explore the outdoors. “It was both rewarding and rejuvenating, a reminder of the power of nature, community and shared learning” she says.

Kamperman reflects on a time when the counselors and the kids learned from each other. “There was an amazing moment I had on a long hike where the campers started singing a song in Czech and I knew it in English, so we ended up singing both versions at the campfire that night.”

During their stay, the ISC team visited two other YMCAs in the Czech Republic. One was the downtown Prague YMCA while another was in a small rural community like the one where they volunteered.

The facility in the capital city was like YMCAs in the U.S. with a pool and fitness center. However, the rural YMCA was a family’s home being used as a YMCA, run by the family with community support. Similarly, the YMCA in Stary Plez nec was started by a family which purchased the building that houses the YMCA and holds the mortgage that is supported by program fees, grants and two apartment rentals upstairs that are currently housing displaced Ukrainians.

“The families that started those YMCAS have a dedication to the mission of the YMCA that is beyond anything I have experienced,” exclaims Kamperman.

“Going to another country and being emersed in an unfamiliar culture creates growth and understanding in so many ways,” says incoming ISC Chair Tracy Muckey.

“I can say that I left a piece of my heart in Stary Plzenec and brought back cherished memories of friendship,” adds Wenker.

To learn more about ISC volunteer projects abroad and Zoom projects from home with youth abroad, contact Tracy Muckey at Tracy@Muckeys.com or fill out a volunteer interest form on the YMCA Alumni site.

<https://www.cognitofrms.com/YMCAAlumni1/YMCAAlumniInternationalServiceCorpsVolunteerForm>

Travel Opportunities for Y Alumni , Friends & Family:

Join fellow alumni members, bring your friends and family on any of these 2026-2027 amazing trips! The Lagerblades and Mohrmans are considering the Classic Canada & New England trip this fall. Check out this trip and other opportunities at this link:

<https://www.ymcaalumni.org/travel-club>

