

# JUST GETTING Started

IGLA FOCUSES ON PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OF THE IOWA GREAT LAKES

The Iowa Great Lakes Association is wrapping up its first decade of existence in 2018, and while those 10 years represent many accomplishments and achievements, you have to back up several more decades to truly understand the organization.



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYLAN HOWE

## MEET BILL VANORSDEL

Bill VanOrsdel has a long history with the Iowa Great Lakes. His grandfather farmed west of Milford, his father was raised there and graduated from Okoboji High School. VanOrsdel grew up in Des Moines, but recalls as a young boy vacationing at Manhattan Beach and Vacation Village with his family and loving the Iowa Great Lakes.

“Once you get this lake in your blood, you can’t get it out,” he said. “I love it.”

Vacationing for just 4-5 days a summer didn’t satisfy VanOrsdel’s desire to enjoy Okoboji, and in 1978 he purchased his West Lake home. Having met Ace Cory at that time, he almost immediately found himself getting involved with organizations in Dickinson County and getting other residents involved as well.

While many good things were accomplished with those organizations, VanOrsdel saw a need to form a new group during 2007-2008 when a major hog producer in Iowa announced plans to

build a hog confinement off Highway 86 west of Vick’s Corner. More than 300 Dickinson County residents protested the proposal, so there was a strong movement against the plan, but VanOrsdel sensed the approach being taken wasn’t the long-term solution an agricultural state like Iowa needed.

Taking action, VanOrsdel raised \$500,000 to start the Iowa Great Lakes Association (IGLA). He personally led the efforts to control hog production in Dickinson County by working with the state legislature, but local option was denied.

VanOrsdel then devised a unique solution. Working with the major hog producers, he explained that placing hog confinements close to the lakes would court a public relations disaster. They agreed and asked for a solution.

“We asked for limitations of the 10 largest lakes in Iowa and 10 miles around them,” he said. What they got was a four-mile radius

around the Iowa Great Lakes, a “gentleman’s agreement” that has been honored over the past decade.

After the hog confinement legislation was passed, \$200,000 remained in the IGLA accounts, so VanOrsdel expanded the organization’s focus.

When IGLA was formed, VanOrsdel chose to create it as a 501(c)4 non-profit. What differentiates it from most non-profits is that the group can lobby, advertise and initiate legal action. However, donations to the organization are not tax deductible.

Being able to lobby the legislature has been a significant advantage for IGLA as it has taken on various causes. They have not had to rely solely on gifts and donations, but have received state funds on behalf of specific projects.

One recent example is the restoration work on Center Lake. While once a pristine

body of water, soil erosion, phosphorous runoff, increasing common carp population and leaking septic tanks had all contributed to deteriorating water quality. While it took more than five years of persistence, IGLA was able to lobby for \$1 million in state funds to aid in restoration efforts. The final component of the multi-pronged plan for improvements is the Iowa Great Lakes Sanitary District sewer line work which will begin this fall to replace the last of the septic systems.

In the 10 years since its inception, the Iowa Great Lakes Association has worked diligently to protect the Iowa Great Lakes and its watershed. The organization is led by Phil Petersen, Jen Johnson and Bill VanOrsdel.

In addition to hog production and water quality, IGLA has tackled nearly every topic that has threatened quality of life in the Iowa Great Lakes. Bur Oak blight, curly-leaf pondweed, zebra mussels and Asian carp are among the nature-related threats that IGLA has invested time and resources to. Most recently they are following developments and prepared to get involved as oil-contaminated soil from a train derailment

near Doon is being disposed of in the Dickinson County landfill east of Arnolds Park.

IGLA has worked in conjunction with nearly every initialed organization in the county – Department of Natural Resources, Okoboji Protective Association, Clean Water Alliance, Department of Transportation, Board of Supervisors and more.

“We’ve been involved in nearly every controversy here and been successful,” VanOrsdel said. “We’ve done a lot of really positive things and we’re committed to what we do.”

Not only does the organization respond to natural threats, they believe in getting in front of growth and development in order to provide leadership. IGLA played a large part in Arnold Park Amusement Park restoration efforts and the multi-phase improvements to the Iowa Great Lakes Maritime Museum, Majestic Pavilion and Roof Garden.

Looking ahead, VanOrsdel envisions a master plan for growth and development, noting that the Iowa Great Lakes is the only legitimate vacation destination in a 200-mile radius.

“We have to develop a master plan for how things should be developed,” he noted. “People want to be here because of the beauty of the lakes and all the amenities.

“You need to give it leadership, so let’s get in front of it and give it leadership.”

## MEET PHIL PETERSEN

Name any organization in Dickinson County that works to preserve and protect the Iowa Great Lakes and you’ll likely find that Phil Petersen is part of it.

Petersen was born and raised in neighboring Spencer, but like VanOrsdel, enjoyed summers on West Okoboji. He was away from the area for nearly four decades while he worked for Motorola, mostly in Chicago, but in 2000 returned to the Iowa Great Lakes, purchasing a home a few doors down from The Inn.

Petersen was serving a term as president of the Okoboji Protective Association in 2007 when Bill VanOrsdel contacted him about the soon-to-be-formed Iowa Great Lakes Association. VanOrsdel planned to take the lead as president of IGLA, but wanted Petersen as the executive director. Petersen agreed to take on the new role after his term with OPA was completed.

Petersen and VanOrsdel make a great team as leadership for the organization. Petersen lives

year-round in Okoboji, VanOrsdel resides in Des Moines but spends a great deal of time in the Iowa Great Lakes during warm weather months.

“Bill lives in Des Moines and has connections with state government — the DNR and the legislature. That’s one of the things that makes this possible,” Petersen said of the success IGLA has experienced during its first decade.

He mentioned the \$1 million for Center Lake restoration and \$300,000 for the electric fish barrier as examples of funds the Iowa Great Lakes area would not have received had it not been for VanOrsdel lobbying at the state level.

“It just wouldn’t have been done,” he said.

While water quality issues are probably the number one concern of the group, Petersen mentioned “smart growth” as another focus.

IGLA has paid careful attention to the proposed East Loch Estates, a 66-acre parcel of land north of Chalstrom Beach that has become a contentious topic due to concern over sewer and water capacity and traffic density.

Imagine IGLA with its proposed beautification of the Highway 71 corridor from Milford to Spirit Lake as well as areas in the entertainment district of Arnolds Park is an organization IGLA will work closely with.

Petersen was headed to a meeting about the sale of the current Okoboji Middle School building in Arnolds Park at the time of this interview, and

to an Okoboji City Council meeting later that day regarding reduced speed limits on Stake Out and Sanborn Roads.

If a topic impacts growth in the Iowa Great Lakes area, Petersen is passionate about it.

“Smart growth is growth that is planned, versus what happens because someone just does something,” Petersen explained.

He attends monthly meetings of various boards and organizations to keep abreast of changes and developments. He shares opinions, writes letters and gets on the agenda when necessary.

Petersen and VanOrsdel work closely together as leadership of IGLA, talking nearly every day. “We can move much faster than most organizations,” Petersen said.

The duo recognize that communication and education are key to their success.

“You have to have community behind it to get things accomplished,” Petersen said.

Enter Jen Johnson, IGLA community development manager.

## MEET JEN JOHNSON

Jen Johnson is an expert communicator, utilizing a variety of tools to let the community know about IGLA and what it is doing.



Take a look at the group’s website, [iagreatlakes.org](http://iagreatlakes.org), for example, and you’ll see links to dozens of news items from various sources. You’ll find public service videos on everything from the need for an additional box culvert, to Restore the Park, to zebra mussels to enjoying the winter months at the Iowa Great Lakes.

Print advertising, billboards, social media — all fall under Johnson’s direction.

“We hit every platform as far as marketing goes,” Johnson said.

With the county and 10 townships — plus countless organizations, committees and non-profits — all playing a part in decision-making for the Iowa Great Lakes, there is plenty to keep track of.

“Bill and Phil have their fingers on the pulse of what’s going to happen in the Iowa Great Lakes,” Johnson said.

“People have things they want to do that could be detrimental to not only this generation, but generations to come,” she continued.

IGLA works tirelessly to keep that from happening and to make sure voters and residents are aware and informed to make wise decisions or to take action.

“We know there’s going to be development, but we want it to be done responsibly,” Johnson said. “We need to identify areas where development won’t happen and areas where it will.”

In addition to the natural resources, Johnson identifies the Pearson Lakes Art Center, Okoboji Summer Theatre and Bedell Family YMCA as attractions that draw visitors and summertime residents to the Lakes.

“This county has amenities it wouldn’t have without the Lakes,” she said. “It’s a culturally diverse county.”

Johnson echoes the thoughts of VanOrsdel and Petersen that fundraising and lobbying are two key elements to IGLA’s success and traits that set them apart from other protective agencies in the area.

While the members of the IGLA board would not be considered a fraternity of like-minded people, they do share a passion for promoting and protecting the Iowa Great Lakes and its watershed. ■

## LOOKING AHEAD

What does the future hold for IGLA? Bill VanOrsdel himself says it best on one of the group’s promotional videos:

“We represent the interest of all Dickinson County residents and we value the quality of life our magnificent natural resources provide to each and every one of us. I strongly encourage you to join us in our cooperative efforts to protect the natural resources and economics of the Iowa Great Lakes.

“Together we can do so much more.”

[www.iagreatlakes.com](http://www.iagreatlakes.com)