Ikse Bio

Jenna Lee Mennen was born 13 February 1995 in the San Francisco Bay area. Her parents, Paul Mennen and Susan Hough, had from day one thoughtfully provided the best present ever – big brother Alex. At once entertainment, guardian, faithful servant, and co-conspirator, Alex was a fixture at Jenna's side. The two of them explored the world, finding themselves braver and stronger together but always willing to have their separate adventures too. Writing the usual description for new teachers, her parents settled on phrasing that seemed to encapsulate Jenna, "What you need to know about my kid is that Jenna has never wanted to be the princess. She always wanted to be the knight." This remained true throughout Jenna's life – she was always a warrior committed to righting wrongs and to making the world a better place.

When Jenna was 15, the summer camp she'd been going to for years closed down. Mom presented a new option, Les Voyageurs. "Look, with this camp you get to live in the woods! And if you go for a full four weeks, you get a great big adventure trip in the northern wilderness!"

The family drove Jenna to camp that first summer. They pulled into the parking lot and a tall thin man with a mane of gray curls bounded over and greeted Jenna enthusiastically in French. Cue deer-in-the-headlights look. He tried again, in very simple French. At this point it was clear Jenna didn't remember a word of French and wasn't too sure about English. He changed to English, and introduced himself as Dahveed, and as they went to get Jenna checked in, where she chose the camp name Ikwe, he gradually began dropping more French words into the conversation. It was clear that Jenna was in good hands.

Report cards from camp were entertaining. The counselors found a positive spin for everything, praising Jenna's commitment to speaking French even when whispering after lights-out, and her leadership skills in teaching other students to climb trees. One

of the very first people Jenna met at camp was Solange. When they said they would be together again next summer, did they already know this was a forever friendship?

Jenna left for camp an anxious and often-depressed teen, not too unusual for a fifteen-year-old. She returned calmer, stronger, happier, and incidentally far beyond her classmates who had taken a year more of French class. She sat us down and explained that, living in camp as Ikwe, she became more the person she wanted to be, and in an effort to keep those changes alive, she would like to continue going by her camp name.

In Ikwe's next great adventure, she decided that a year studying in France would be wonderful. This entailed more than a few sacrifices. One of the best things about high school was band, and Ikwe's flute and other skills put her in leadership positions in both marching and symphonic bands. Marching band was particularly good because of its mix of demands – musicality and athleticism, teamwork and self-discipline. The friends were another feature. May and SJ played trombone, and the band carpool vehicles were full of instruments and conversation, a lively mix as this pack of friends helped each other navigate life. Leaving for a year in France meant leaving band, and these friends that meant so much, but Ikwe leaped into the unknown, and went off to Bois-de-Céné.

Like many other exchange students, Ikwe discovered that it's hard to be that far away from home for that long. The great gift of this year was the host family. The Badaud family was warmly welcoming. They had little English, but a gift for slowing down their conversation to include their new bonus daughter, and they did indeed treat Ikwe as a daughter. The connection has remained strong across the years and miles.

Ikwe returned to the US, and after a fabulous cross-country road trip, started college at UW-Madison. There was fencing and ultimate, Scandinavian studies and runs along the lakeshore paths, and each summer, a return to Les Voyageurs, now as an integral

part of staff. Here Ikwe met more beloved friends, here Solange and Ikwe met Jean-Canot, here Ikwe blossomed, exercising organizational skills, learning and teaching wilderness skills, living and growing in a strong and nourishing community.

After college, Ikwe joined the staff at High Trails Outdoor Science School. For many hours each day, the staff took students out into the snowy woods and taught them about the natural world. Ikwe loved living in the high desert of southern California, and climbed with friends almost every weekend, stretching their abilities and drinking in the beauty of the high country.

Did I say ‘their’? Yes, around this time Ikwe began to feel constrained by ‘she’ and ‘her’. Ikwe explained once that it’s hard enough being small, young and female in a male-dominated profession – having every single sentence refer to you as female just makes it harder. They’d rather be seen as human.

Similarly, one summer Ikwe spent the summer with Line3 protesters, fighting to protect clean water in northern Minnesota. They became self-conscious about being an Anglo person who had chosen to take an Ojibwe name, as they spent time with Ojibwe people. Accordingly, they created the name Ikse, with a similar sound but no awkward etymology.

Ikse still wondered where the fulcrum of their life could be found. Where could they gain the most leverage to make the world better? They decided on becoming a high school teacher, believing that learning history, civics, and government was becoming more important than ever. As COVID shut down the world, Ikse settled into remote grad school, based in Two Harbors. One professor disapproved of Ikse’s tendency to zoom in from a hammock in the backyard, but most had no quarrel with Ikse’s choice of classroom.

Living in Minnesota meant finally having decent health coverage and a chance to get a pesky lump looked at. The bad news arrived – it was not only cancer but a supremely aggressive form. Ikse finished a Masters in History, then settled into a life of treatment, volunteering at camp and with the League of Women Voters, and occasional guide work. Their bucket list included some travel and writing, but highest on the list was making a home, a warm and hospitable place with good food and people who supported each other. They created this space with dear friends, chosen family. Visiting that house was always a treat. There would be laughter, music, conversations about the state of the world and how to improve it. There would be superb meals, often of foods foraged or grown in the backyard. It was truly a home.

As it became clear that Ikse's life was going to be drastically shortened, they poured effort into finishing their first novel. In the closing weeks of Ikse's life, Jean-Canot spent long hours formatting the work for publication, and the preview copies arrived in time for Ikse to see them. The collection of campfire stories was less polished, but was pushed forward with the help of friends. Both books are now in print, a lasting legacy.

Ikse died on January 22, 2025, after a short time in hospice care. Family and friends had expected this – it had been more than two years since the terminal diagnosis – but it is still a blow. Ikse lived with intent, with love, with a need to brighten their corner of the world, and they were a shining light. They were heartbroken not to be able to do the things they intended, not to have more chances to change the world. But in their short life they did change the world. The ripples of their life and work are still radiating out and reflecting back, and they live on in our memory.