

Young people flourishing in new start-ups



The Barn Chefs in Coe Hill: Luca Molteni, Sarah Woods and their son Matayo. JIM EADIE Special to This Week

By Jim Eadie

“After a couple of years I have been able to get my head out of my own park, and I am really seeing how awesome this area is for startups by young entrepreneur. This is definitely the place to do that!”

So says Amy West, the new owner of Westpine Camp in Lake St. Peter, formerly The Orioles Nest.

After her mother noticed the “Park for Sale” sign while snowmobiling in the area, West purchased the “fixer upper” before the snow was off the ground.

“I am proud to say that I am the fourth generation of resort owners in my family. I was born and raised in that business, doing reservations and selling candy as a kid. This one was already established, but now I can put my own spin on it.”

In a familiar theme, West gives a lot of credit to the municipality of Hastings Highlands, which assisted her in navigating the permit process for changes and new buildings on the property.

“What helps me most, is thinking outside of the box,” she said.

“Anyone who thinks that this is the only way, this is the only person, this is what it should look like – they’re not going to make the most of their opportunities. The majority of my success at the park is my ability to look outside the box, and being creative with what I have.”

Being a young woman, and a single mother at the time, brought its own complications.

“Most people expected a camp owner would be male and 50 years old. I didn’t fit that mold,” she said. “So there is a need to prove yourself.”

West can climb poles to change light bulbs, and she can negotiate contractual arrangements.

“I would love to see more young entrepreneurs and families here,” she said.

“We now have four younger families in Lake St. Peter. It brings a feeling of renewal and excitement to our little community. And businesses don’t need to compete with each other. You can sell antiques over here; I can sell antiques over there. The end result is that it brings more people who want to buy antiques! We can all work together on this.”

Looking a little further south, another young man with a family has recently opened a wine making establishment in the Town of Bancroft.

After encouragement from friends and others, Jeff Chambers decided there was sufficient market to open The Old Oak Barrel store in the former Jenkins Music store location.

“Loyalist College was a big help for me,” he said. “They offer small business courses, and help with business planning.”

Of two major hurdles he faced, one was expected, and one was unexpected.

Unfortunately but foreseeably, the Alcohol and Gaming Commission were unable to do their inspections in a timely fashion, as their inspectors were all tied up with the Pan Am games.

At the local level, getting a permit for a sign on the front of the store from the municipality was a less anticipated stumbling block. Chambers found that he faced a complex array of rules, followed by changes to those rules, which added an unexpected significant cost to his startup.

‘Starting up was not as easy as I thought it would be, but business is picking up nicely,’ he said. ‘Without a plan, you are in trouble. You must focus on your goals.’

In Coe Hill, The Barn Chef is about to open its doors, realizing the dreams of a young couple who met in the George Brown College Culinary Arts program in 1997. Sarah Woods is from Omamee, and Luca Molteni is from Italy. Since graduating, they have travelled around the world working as chefs. ‘For 20 years, we were always working, and never had a holiday,’ he said. ‘Now people can't believe we are here in Coe Hill,’ she said.

Their work took them to Egypt, the Middle East, Hong Kong, China, the Caribbean, and lastly to Kenya. While working in Kenya, they adopted their son Matayo. Saving all of their money, the family has come to Canada to start a business.

‘My mom lives near Apsley,’ said Woods. ‘I absolutely love to fish,’ said Molteni. That made the decision simple for them. One of the biggest complications was arranging for her non-Canadian spouse to come to Canada to work. They also had administrative arrangements to make for their adopted son. ‘Member of Parliament Mike Bossio was a huge help for us,’ she said.

Now they are waiting for the license required to process meat products. The Barn Chefs will wholesale and retail cold cuts, meats, preserves, chocolates, and custom cakes.

Their advice? ‘Be prepared to change the plan one thousand times if necessary,’ proclaimed Luca. ‘And make sure to get your customers to believe in you.’