

Ask SCORE for Business Advice

“Ask SCORE” Column

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Bed and breakfast owners helped by SCORE mentorby Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt

Combine a dedicated SCORE counselor, the Manitowoc Economic Development Corporation's E-Seed Entrepreneur's Course, and a farm couple with a vision to open a bed and breakfast. Add years of mentoring and hard work and watch the dream come true.

That's what happened when Barb and Nate Calkins took an E-Seed Course and got connected with Diane Unger, SCORE counselor and partner in Unger Associates, a leadership development firm. Planning began in 2007, and culminated in February when the Calkins opened Lake Orchard Bed & Breakfast on the Sheboygan County Lake Michigan shoreline (www.lakeorchardretreat.com).

"Nate and Mary have a genuine enthusiasm and passion for their business. They were practical and yet determined to overcome various obstacles to make their business happen," Unger said. She spent three years mentoring the couple with face-to-face meetings on their farm.

The new business closely followed state regulations to become licensed in the hotel industry. Because the original building dated back to 1895 and included a summer kitchen and chicken hatchery, the couple decided on demolition and construction of a new building. However, family history is preserved with books, photos, trunks, and pieces of furniture that honor the generations.

Following this theme, the new structure has four elaborate bedroom suites that are named after Helene, Laura, Ella and Doris Wunsh (Mary's ancestors), four generations of strong women. The farm itself has been in Mary's family for six generations and is a working farm.

"We are the last active livestock operation on the shores," Nate said. "We (Nate and his father-in-law) raise 350 heifers for local dairy producers." Because of the heifers, Nate says that it works well with a bed and breakfast, since he is already on the farm seven days a week.

As part of their business plan, the Calkins made sure there were plenty of activities for guests. There is a nine-hole golf course, hiking trails, canoeing on Lake Michigan, groomed snow trails for skiing and snowshoeing, and a common room for socializing. The common room can also be used for small gatherings such as bridal showers, quilting, knitting or scrapbooking.

The combination of activities and attention to detail have guests raving about the place, and the Calkins are running ahead of their initial projections."It has been way beyond our dreams, and now that we're moving, we feel confident about next year," he said. "It has been a lot of work, but I can't feel taxed by being too busy. That's what we got in the business for. The positive feedback from customers has been phenomenal." As the business develops, Unger continues to work with the Calkins on social media and marketing. The Calkins credit her for giving them information and having a positive attitude that has been priceless. "I can't praise her enough," Nate said. "Diane is like family and has been a blessing through all of this. She really helped us look at the finite details and how to draw people in and what to highlight. She appreciates the place."

Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt is co-owner of DB Commercial Real Estate in Green Bay and assistant district director for SCORE, Wisconsin.