

KITSAP

January 2026

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The first thing most people notice about Jet is his size. The sleek, muscular Doberman looks every bit the serious working dog. But within seconds, that impression softens. Jet nudges a hand for attention, leans his full weight into a leg to snuggle, or settles squarely into a lap as if he's known the person forever. Whatever assumptions people bring with them rarely survive their first encounter with Jet.

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Planning with Purpose for a Pivotal Year

Forward
THINKING

Welcome to the January 2026 edition of Kitsap Business. A new year invites reflection, but it also calls for intention. Across Kitsap County, businesses and organizations are entering 2026 with a clear understanding that stability and growth rarely come from standing still. They come from paying attention, planning ahead, and staying connected to the communities they serve.

The stories in this issue reflect that mindset. They highlight local entrepreneurs, nonprofits, and leaders who are responding thoughtfully to real needs such as housing, workforce development, education, tourism, and community well-being. Each story underscores a simple truth. Progress in Kitsap tends to be incremental, collaborative, and rooted in place.

In a region shaped by seasonal tourism, evolving work patterns, and a growing mix of long-time residents and newcomers, adaptability has become a core business skill. But adaptability does not mean improvising without a plan. The most resilient organizations we cover are those that take time to assess where they are, understand who they serve, and make deliberate choices about where to focus their energy and resources.

That theme carries through our Executive Q&A and feature stories this month. Whether the focus is on education, hospitality, retail, or community service, the common thread is preparation paired with collaboration. Success is rarely isolated. It is built through partnerships, shared knowledge, and a recognition that individual businesses are strongest when the broader community is healthy and connected.

Looking ahead, this spirit of preparation is especially important as Kitsap County readies itself for an influx of visitors tied to the FIFA World Cup this coming summer, including the arrival of a regional fan zone. For many local businesses, this presents



a meaningful opportunity, along with new competition and heightened expectations from visitors.

In response, Kitsap Business, in partnership with Visit Kitsap, the Greater Kitsap Chamber, and Vibe Coworks, is hosting a new small business workshop

series titled "The Local Business Game Plan: Building Your 2026 Marketing Plan." The free seminar series is designed to help small retailers, restaurants, and service businesses get ready for increased foot traffic and heightened competition connected to World Cup-related tourism. Each session stands on its own, allowing business owners and managers to attend one workshop or the full series based on their needs and availability.

The seminar lineup includes:

- **90 Day Marketing Plan You Will Actually Use**
A Plug and Play Growth Map for Peak Tourism Season
Thursday, Jan. 29 | 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Location: Vibe Coworks
- **Get Found Fast**
How to Be Visible Where Visitors Search
Wednesday, Feb. 11 | 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Location: Greater Kitsap Chamber
- **From Click to Customer**
Turn Online Visitors into Paying Customers
Thursday, Feb. 19 | 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Location: Vibe Coworks
- **Collaborate to Win**
Cross Promotions, Referrals, and Local Partnership Playbooks
Thursday, Feb. 26 | 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Location: Greater Kitsap Chamber
- **Playbook for Peak Season Success**
High-Level Strategies to Maximize Tourism Impact
Wednesday, March 4 | 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Location: Virtual via Zoom
To register, go to <https://kitsapbusiness.com/local-business-game-plan>

As we move into 2026, our hope is that this issue and the conversations it sparks help local business owners feel better prepared for what lies ahead. Planning is not about predicting the future. It is about being ready to meet it.

As always, thank you for reading and for supporting local business journalism. ■

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9 Locations to Serve You in Kitsap

A Castle on the Hill

How Nordic Hill Manor Turned a Family Dream Into One of Kitsap's Most Sought-After Retreats

Photos Courtesy of Leah Thompson/ Scandia Studio

By Quinn Propst

Ward Media Staff Reporter

Perched above Poulsbo with sweeping views of town, forest, and—on clear days—even the Seattle skyline, Nordic Hill Manor doesn't immediately reveal the century of family history behind its stone façade. From the road, it's the kind of place you might glimpse once and wonder about for years afterward—a turreted, castle-like house tucked among 20 acres of evergreens, trails, and meadows.

For Heinz and KJ Lange, the couple who now run it as a thriving vacation rental and retreat space, Nordic Hill Manor is equal parts family legacy, hospitality business, and ongoing love story with Kitsap County.

"We're really just creating the space," KJ said. "People come here to make their own memories, spend time with family and friends. It's humbling to know we get to be part of that."

A Dream House on the Hill

The story of Nordic Hill Manor begins with Heinz's father, a USC-trained cinematographer and avid photographer

who fell in love with European bed-and-breakfasts.

Heinz and his father traveled through Europe, staying in small inns and guesthouses. His father captured images of stone manors, cobblestone courtyards, and turreted roofs. When he settled on the family's land above Poulsbo—property that's been in the family for more than 100 years—he began to imagine building his own version of those places.

"He always had a dream of building this manor up here, kind of like a bed and breakfast," Heinz said. "We went to an architect with some of my pictures and emails—cobblestones, the turret, that European feel—and we were our own general contractor. It took about five or six years, doing it ourselves."

Heinz's father started the project at 78 years old.

The manor that emerged from that vision is no modest B&B. At more than

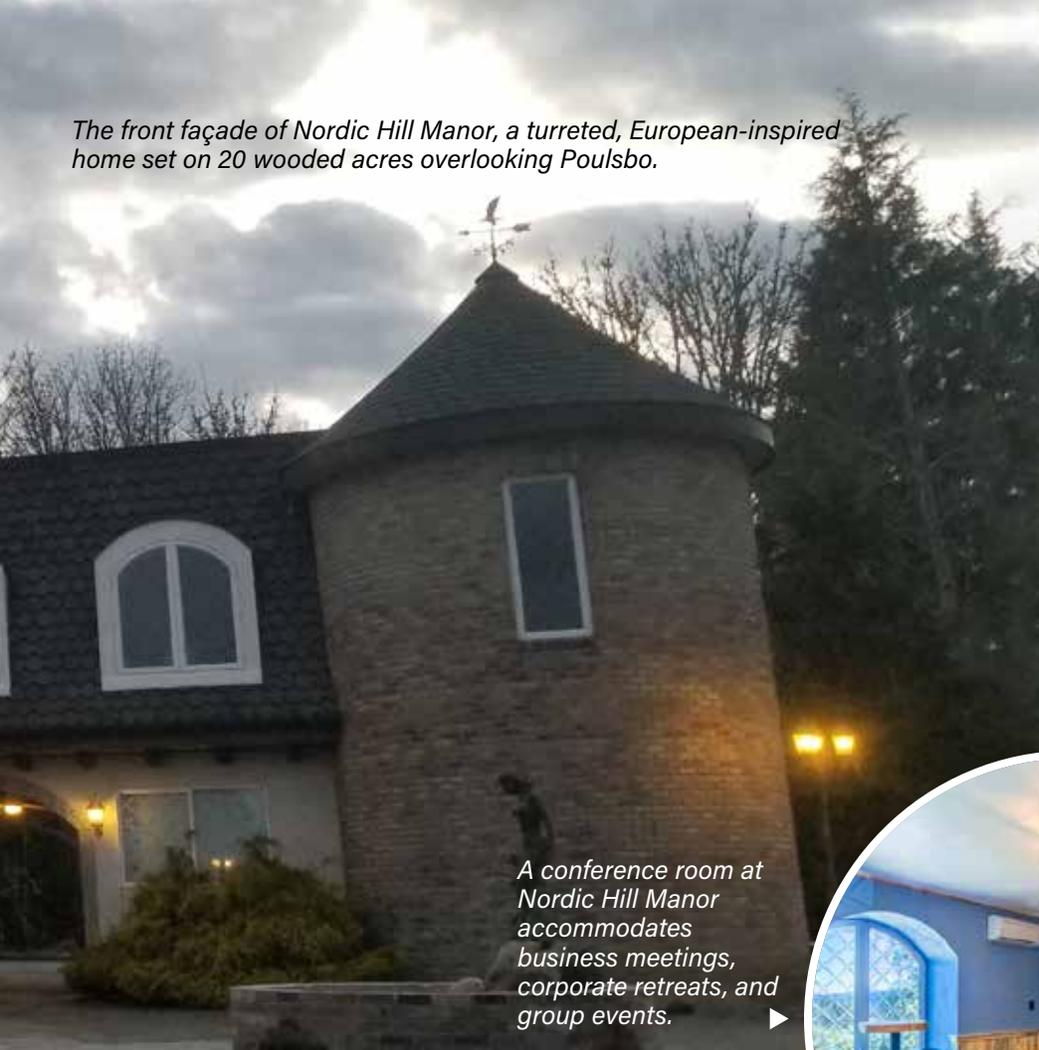
10,000 square feet, with multiple floors, seven bathrooms, and bedrooms outfitted with kitchenettes—a nod to a short-lived idea of housing independent seniors under one roof—the house was always meant to function as both a home and a gathering place.

"He always wanted to build his generational dream house," Heinz said. "He lived in the lower part, ran it as a bed and breakfast, and the idea was the next generation would take it over."

Nordic Hill Manor owners Heinz and KJ Lange have transformed the hilltop property into a destination vacation rental and retreat space above Poulsbo.



The front façade of Nordic Hill Manor, a turreted, European-inspired home set on 20 wooded acres overlooking Poulsbo.



A conference room at Nordic Hill Manor accommodates business meetings, corporate retreats, and group events.



"People nickname it as a castle," Heinz said. "We call it a manor, but if you Google 'castle Poulsbo,' it's us and the place on Viking."

That identity fits naturally with the couple's heritage and Poulsbo's "Little Norway" roots.

"My father was Norwegian. My grandmother came directly from Norway. I'm Austrian. KJ is Swedish," Heinz said. "We fly four flags out front—Norway, Sweden, Austria, and the U.S. We call it Northern European hospitality. It has a very European influence and flair, with a Norwegian tilt that fits right into Poulsbo."

"It's a place that has a sense of humor, but we take our hospitality seriously," KJ said.

Guests arrive to a stately hilltop "castle," then discover playful surprises: a hot tub tucked inside the turret, massage chairs overlooking the valley, and a home theater complete with a popcorn maker. Outdoors, trails wind through wooded acreage, while lawns host games, reunions, and wedding-adjacent gatherings.

One amenity consistently earns rave reviews.

"The gourmet kitchen,"

Heinz said. "Airbnb even has a special category for that, and we fit right into it. People walk in and say, 'This is the most well-stocked kitchen we've ever seen.'"

That reputation is intentional. Both Heinz and KJ love to cook, and years of hosting large family gatherings shaped every decision.

"Every year, we'd say, 'We should have brought this' or 'We really need one of those here,'" KJ said. "This year was the first year I didn't think of anything else to add."

"People always ask, 'Do you have drip? Do you have a French press? Do you have...?'" Heinz said. "We just answered by putting in everything—grinder, drip, press."

Space to Gather—and to Breathe

Beyond any single amenity, guests comment on how spacious the manor feels.

"Once you get to that 14 to 16 range, people are amazed it doesn't feel crowded,"

From Bed-and-Breakfast to Destination Rental

When Heinz's father passed away in 2016, the couple faced a reality check: they loved the manor, but they did not want to live on site and operate a traditional bed-and-breakfast.

"Guests come at nine, eleven, midnight. They want breakfast at five or six," Heinz recalls. "KJ was the one here waiting for them."

KJ quickly realized why most B&B owners live on the premises. But the Langes already had a home elsewhere and didn't want to relocate.

Rather than shutting down or selling, they made a measured pivot. At first, they honored existing reservations and slowly transitioned the property to a vacation rental model.

"Our dream was always that you give people a code, they come in, and it feels like their place—like when we go on vacation," KJ said.

The result is a full-house rental that can sleep up to 25 people—"depending on how well you like each other," KJ joked—

though most groups fall into the 14-to-16 range, which the couple considers ideal.

Then came 2020.

Heinz retired from a corporate career in international supply-chain logistics, planning to focus on growing the business. Within months, the COVID-19 pandemic wiped out every booking for the first half of the year.

"I thought, 'This was a good decision,'" he said. "We lost all the bookings. The first six months were gone."

But as travelers gravitated toward private, drive-to destinations, Nordic Hill Manor rebounded.

"We got really busy that year, and it hasn't stopped since," KJ said.

Today, weekends and summers are often booked a year in advance. The Langes are increasingly focused on midweek retreats for remote workers, small businesses, and special-interest groups.

A Castle with a Sense of Humor

Though officially a manor, the house has taken on another identity in the minds of guests.



The on-site bar at Nordic Hill Manor is stocked with glassware, tools, and barware for guest use.



A mermaid statue and fountain on the grounds of Nordic Hill Manor overlook sweeping views of Poulsbo and the surrounding landscape.

Heinz said. "You've got three floors, all kinds of different activities, and nobody's on top of each other. Seven bathrooms helps."

That flexibility has attracted returning groups, including a now-annual Dungeons & Dragons retreat.

"There's a group of mostly guys. It's like a four-day extravaganza," KJ said. "We installed special internet equipment so they could all be online and hooked up together."

"We have a fourteen-foot table and an interactive board in the conference room," Heinz adds. "They're streaming to friends across the U.S., all playing together. They've been coming for four or five years."

The conference room also supports corporate off-sites and midweek retreats.

"For a board or small business group, you can work, then relax. Bring in catering, or cook. You don't have to leave, but you can," KJ said. "Work, play, relax—that's kind of the formula."

Community Connections and Giving Back

Though Nordic Hill Manor draws guests from across the region, the Langes remain

deeply connected to the Kitsap community. KJ is a longtime realtor and Rotary member, and the business partners with Visit Kitsap and Visit Poulsbo.

"We support local nonprofits. We've donated stays for auction items," Heinz said.

One organization especially close to their hearts is Fishline. Over the years, the couple has hosted benefit events at the manor, including the Halloween-themed "Scare Away Hunger."

Several years ago, the couple hosted Nordic Music Fest, an outdoor benefit concert on the hill that drew around 200 people and raised funds for Fishline. When that proved logistically more complicated than they wanted to repeat, they collaborated on a new fundraiser: Scare Away Hunger, a Halloween-themed, ticketed event hosted inside the manor.

"Amanda at Fishline has a Hollywood background, so she came with this whole vision," KJ said.

At the time, Fishline was facing a major budget gap—about \$80,000 needed to finish out the year. The Langes set a goal to raise \$20,000 to help meet that need. In previous years, similar events had raised \$10,000. As the event approached, an anonymous donor stepped in with a challenge.

"They told Fishline, 'If you get your \$10,000 from the event, I'll make it \$20,000,'" KJ said. "We did it. It was amazing."

The Halloween theme would have delighted Heinz's father, who once staged elaborate neighborhood scares involving a faux crate from "Universal Studios," heavy breathing on a tape loop, and a towering "Frankenstein" emerging from behind a screen.

"When we did Scare Away Hunger, I thought, 'Oh my gosh, he would have loved this,'" Heinz said. "Amanda put one of his old animated faces right by the front door in his honor."

Hospitality in the Hard Moments

Some of the manor's most meaningful stays are also the quietest.

"One group came because a family member had stage four cancer," KJ said. "They knew it was the last time they were all going to be together."

"It still chokes me up," Heinz said. "That's when it really hit us—we're not just renting a big house. We're helping create spaces for these once-in-a-lifetime, sometimes last-in-a-lifetime, memories."

The Langes live about 10 minutes away

and remain hands-on owners. When power outages, snowstorms, or unexpected issues arise, they respond quickly.

Once, guests were due to arrive just as a power outage swept through the area.

"I ran to Walmart and bought batteries, a bunch of flashlights, some treats, even a couple of coolers because I wasn't sure what they'd bring," KJ said. "I had it all by the front door when they arrived. The power didn't come back on until the next day. They were pretty glad to have it."

"Some people aren't used to that kind of weather, especially if they're from out of the area," KJ said. "Being local means we can show up, reassure them, and get them moving again."

Looking Ahead

For the Langes, Nordic Hill Manor is a long-term investment in both family and community.

"We see it as multi-generational," Heinz said. "The property's been in the family for over a hundred years, and our kids are excited about it."

"It's a business we've created that will run whether we're here or not," KJ said. "We have cleaners, systems, everything in place. Hopefully we can hand that down, and they'll make it even better. That's what you hope for with your kids."

There are ideas still on the horizon, but the core mission remains unchanged.

"Joy, laughter, great memories, experiences," Heinz said. "That's really what this place is about." ■



The great room at Nordic Hill Manor features a grand staircase, bar, and multiple seating areas with expansive views of Poulsbo.

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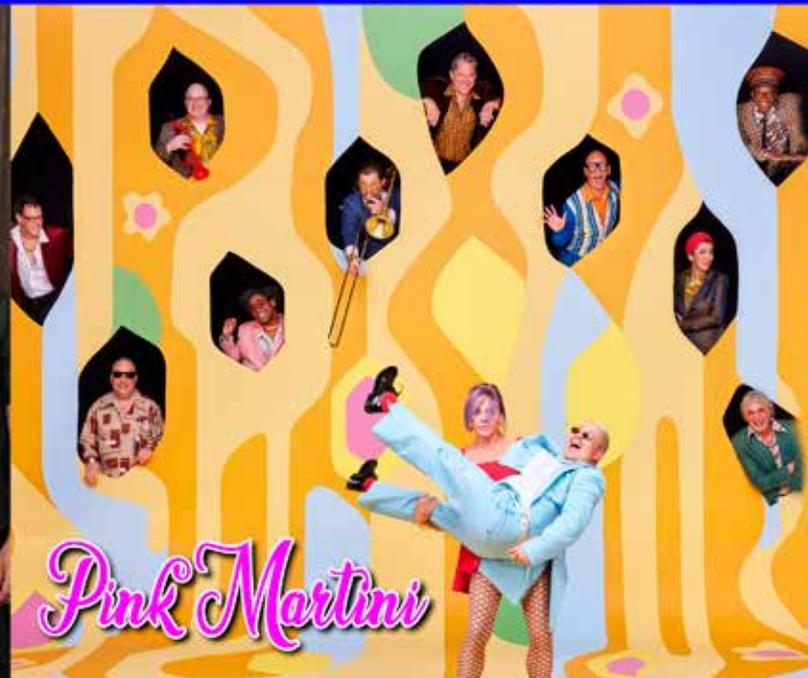
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Pink Martini

Friday, January 30, 2025
Show 7:30 PM

Feature



Loaves of freshly baked bread cool in the kitchen at Monica's Waterfront Bakery & Cafe.



Photos Courtesy of Leah Thompson/ Scandia Studio

A pastry display showcases the baked goods that have made Monica's a longtime favorite on Silverdale's waterfront.

New Owner Brings Fresh Energy to Monica's Waterfront Bakery & Cafe

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

For decades, Monica's Waterfront Bakery & Cafe has been a constant on Silverdale's Old Town waterfront—a place for morning coffee, fresh pastries, and familiar faces. Now, the longtime community gathering spot is entering a new chapter under the ownership of Donna Prior, a former corporate contracts executive who has traded boardrooms and spreadsheets for ovens and espresso machines.

Prior spent 19 years at Nokia, most recently leading contracts management for North America within the company's legal function.

After losing her husband in 2020, she began rethinking her life and career, gradually gravitating toward hospitality through hosting dinner parties, events and brunches with friends.

"I started asking myself what I really wanted to do," Prior said.

That exploration eventually brought her to Kitsap County. Drawn by the area's strong sense of community and its support for small businesses, Prior began looking for an opportunity that aligned with both her professional

skills and her personal values.

"This felt like the right kind of place for me," she said. "The environment here reminds me a bit of where I grew up. I really love the community feel."

Honoring a Layered Legacy

Monica's is a business with history—and not just one chapter. Over the years, the bakery has passed through multiple owners, each leaving their mark. Longtime customers are quick to share stories that stretch back decades.

"Monica and Mark had built something great," Prior said, referring to former owners Monica and Mark Downen. "They took over from someone else, and before that there was a woman named Catherine. People will come in and say, 'Oh, I was coming here

before Mark and Monica.' There are multiple legacies to carry on."

That history isn't lost on Prior. While she's clear that changes are coming, she's equally committed to preserving the qualities that made the bakery a community anchor in the first place.

"Continuing to participate in the community, giving back, supporting local—that's all really important," she said. "Mark and Monica did a great job with that, and I want to continue it."

One daily practice she has no intention of changing is food donation.

"We donate leftover food every day to the local food bank," she said. "The specific partner might evolve, but the idea of sharing what we don't sell—that's not going away. I want to continue that legacy of being a gathering place and a resource."

Her personal passions are also shaping how she gives back. This year, Monica's supported the Humane Society's pet pantry.

"I'm an animal lover—I have a dog," Prior said. "People are





Monica's is known as a community gathering place, a tradition new owner Donna Prior plans to continue.

struggling, and when that happens, pets can suffer too. Supporting the pet pantry felt like the right thing to do."

A New Name, A New Look

One of the most visible changes is coming this spring: a new name and a full rebrand. Monica's Waterfront Bakery will soon become Old Town Kitchen.

"I will be changing the name, and it will be happening fairly soon," Prior said. "Since Monica is so well known, it felt fair to change it. There's the potential for stepping on each other, and neither of us wants that."

The new name is already registered and reflects both location and intention.

"It's going to be called Old Town Kitchen," she said. "I like it because it's directional, it tells people where you are. Hopefully it encourages people to say, 'Oh, you're going down to Old Town—what's happening there?' It also harkens back to what this area originally was."

Inside, the space is getting a top-to-bottom refresh. Painting is scheduled for

mid-January, with new flooring to follow. Prior expects the upstairs renovation to be largely complete by February, with a broader relaunch planned for the spring.

"I'm actively working on refreshing the space," she said. "It's time to update the concept. These are mostly aesthetic changes, but they're important."

Her inspiration pulls from British period dramas.

"Have you ever seen *Downton Abbey*?" she asked. "Downstairs is different from upstairs, and I'm leaning into a little bit of that."

Upstairs, she envisions a warm, relaxed country-house breakfast room—comfortable and unhurried.

"The palette will be cream tones, a darker coffee color, deep espresso accents, and a sage green," she said. "I'm adding banquettes and tables so it's comfortable. There will be lower tables for sitting with coffee and conversation."

Downstairs, the look will be lighter and cleaner, with new tile behind the counter and a more streamlined feel.

Curating the Menu—and the Experience

If the physical space is evolving, so is the menu.

"I've been watching since I came in last summer," Prior said. "I see people get paralyzed at the register. The TV menus were overwhelming, so I took them down. We're going to have a more curated menu."

The goal isn't to remove customer favorites, but to simplify choices and improve flow.

"We'll still sell all the same types of things—sandwiches, salads, pastries, cookies, breakfast burritos," she said. "But instead of a free-for-all, we might have six or seven core sandwiches and a daily special. It makes things easier for everyone."

She also plans to expand the bakery side of the business.

"I love the bread we use now, but we're going to expand," she said. "More bakery staples, baguette loaves—something that brings in daily traffic. Fresh bread people can stop in for."

For Prior, food is just one part of what she wants customers to experience.

"We're not just a coffee shop," she said. "I want people to have an experience. That's why I'm spending so much time on the aesthetics."



New owner Donna Prior poses with members of the Monica's Waterfront Bakery & Cafe staff outside the Old Town Silverdale bakery.



An employee decorates freshly baked cookies, one of Monica's signature offerings.

Outside, she envisions a garden-like deck with flowers and greenery, eventually hosting small events.

"I would love to host baby showers, bridal showers, dinner parties," she said. "In the summer, brunches outside. I want it to feel comfortable and beautiful."

Growing Catering and Community Events

One of Prior's biggest growth priorities is catering.

"I really want to expand the catering business," she said. "Right now it's a smaller percentage of revenue, and I want it to be much larger, whether that's off-site catering or events hosted here."

She's already working with a collaborator to refine menus and operations with the goal of "really moving the needle."

Beyond the café walls, Prior sees opportunity in Kitsap's growing slate of festivals and waterfront events. Plans include pop-ups at Bremerton's Quincy Square and potential participation in a World Cup-themed rib cook-off at the Silverdale waterfront next summer.

Ownership Change

Monica's wasn't initially listed for sale. Through local connections, Prior was introduced to Mark and Monica Downen, and conversations began in February. By July, she had left her corporate role and was working behind the counter and in the kitchen, learning the business firsthand.

"I hadn't worked in food service since high school," she said. "So I spent two months behind the counter, just trying to understand everything."

The transition has been intentionally gradual. Mark continues working in the bakery making cookies, and Monica remains involved by introducing Prior around town and connecting her with community leaders.

"They are such long-standing members of the community," Prior said. "People are

understandably nervous—are you going to change the name, the recipes? But the transition has been really good."

Employee retention has been strong, too.

"The team has stayed," she said. "I've hired a couple of people, but most of the staff is the original Monica's team. Every single person stayed, and they're excited. I'm really proud of that."

From Global Tech to a Small Team

After nearly two decades inside a global corporation, Prior describes entrepreneurship as a continuous learning experience.

"I served customers at Nokia—Verizon was my single biggest customer," she said. "Customers are customers. You treat them well, regardless of industry."

The biggest adjustment has been scale. "At Nokia, there were massive resources," she said. "Here, I have 10 or 11 people on the team. You don't have all of that support, so you have to figure things out differently."

To do that, Prior has immersed herself in the local business ecosystem. She's joined the Washington Hospitality Association, the local chamber of commerce, and an Old Town-focused committee.

"It's about knowing the right people," she said. "How they can help you—and how you can contribute to what they're doing."

The response has been welcoming. "The community feels like a company," she said. "Even if someone can't help directly, they'll say, 'Have you talked to so-and-so?' That willingness has been huge."

Leadership, Culture, and Consistency

Behind the scenes, Prior brings a corporate discipline to a small, close-knit team.

"I'm very big on respect," she said. "I'll respect you, treat you like an adult, and I expect that in return."

A staff member stands ready to take orders at the counter of Monica's Waterfront Bakery & Cafe.

She's also transparent about the numbers.

"I share the financials with the team," she said. "I tell them where we need to improve and ask for ideas. I'm even willing to give bonuses for ideas that save money or improve the experience."

She doesn't shy away from difficult decisions.

"I don't tolerate laziness or lack of contribution," she said. "I've had to make hard decisions, and I'll continue to do so."

External pressures remain constant: rising food costs, minimum wage increases, and competition.

"Cost pressure is the number one challenge," she said. "Food is expensive, there's waste, and competition is always there."

In the kitchen, Prior is hyper-focused on consistency.

"Lack of consistency will kill a business," she said. "I taste everything. I want to know what it's like, and I give feedback."

At the same time, she encourages creativity.

"I asked the cooks and bakers to bring me their ideas," she said. "Let's try it and see what the feedback is. It gives them a creative outlet."

Embracing Old Town's Next Chapter

As Silverdale's Old Town waterfront looks toward revitalization, Prior hopes Old Town Kitchen will grow alongside it.

"I want to embrace the community," she said. "I want to share things with the community and have that energy come back. I know that takes time, but I'm excited to work toward it."

With a new name, refreshed space, and evolving menu on the horizon, she hopes longtime regulars and new visitors alike will keep walking through the door.

"I hope people like what we're doing and keep coming back," she said. "And that new people come in to try it. Come on in." ■





Photo credit: Visit Poulsbo

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PURPOSE MEN

Feature



Photos Courtesy of Purpose

The Purpose Men store in Tacoma, one of the brand's fastest-growing locations.

Purpose with Style

How a Living-Room Boutique Grew Into a Multi-Million-Dollar, Purpose-Driven Brand

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

When Christie Johnson launched Purpose out of her living room 12 years ago, she was simply trying to combine two passions: fashion and giving back. She had no blueprint for a regional retail brand, a growing leadership team, or more than \$550,000 donated to nonprofits. She just wanted shopping to feel meaningful.

"I've always loved style and fashion," Johnson said. "But on its own, shopping can feel kind of vain. I wanted to create something that wasn't just about clothes, something that had a little more umph to it."

That "umph" became Purpose—a faith-informed, philanthropy-minded retailer now operating eight stores across Washington, including women's boutiques and the

growing Purpose Men / Sincere by Purpose concepts. With more locations in the works and annual revenue approaching eight figures, Purpose is at an inflection point: scaling like a modern retailer while holding onto the intimacy of a living-room trunk show.

Where It Began

Purpose began with small "shop nights" at Johnson's home. She got a business license, curated racks of clothes, invited friends over, and donated all proceeds to charity.

Christie Johnson, founder and owner of Purpose, built the company from a living-room boutique into a successful retail brand.



"I honestly had no idea about profit," she said, laughing. "I just gave all the money away. I thought, 'Oh, this isn't a business, this is basically a nonprofit.'"

Word spread quickly. Friends started asking to shop outside the parties, and soon people Johnson didn't know began calling.

"Once that started happening, I realized, you're not actually allowed to have a boutique in your house," she said. "It's illegal. So that kind of forced me to start my first store."

She found a space in downtown Bremerton through local artist Amy Burnett.

"I told her my idea, and she said, 'Well, I don't think this other space is right for you, but what if I move all my stuff out of this little space and you just take that part of the store?'" Johnson recalls. "I had a one-page lease. Now my leases are like 100 pages. It was \$800 a month. Back then that felt like so much."

That tiny, scrappy corner shop became Purpose as the community knows it.

"You could never do that today," Johnson said. "You can't just walk up with an idea and have the building owner say, 'Oh, fun, let's try it.' I feel really grateful that someone took that chance on me."

A Spiritual Nudge and a Clear Mission

Blending fashion with giving wasn't just a business calculation—it felt like a calling.

"I had a very spiritual moment where I felt like God was actually speaking to me, calling me to do it," she said.

At the time, her husband was a submarine officer stationed locally, and Johnson was far from home in North Carolina with a one- and three-year-old.

"I don't know how I survived," she said.

"I'm a quick yes, and then I figure out all the problems later. I said yes, and then I was like, 'Oh my gosh, the kids, the business, life is crazy! And you just figure out those pieces.'"

Rethinking the "Give Back" Model

Initially, Johnson donated everything. As payroll, rent, and inventory realities set in, she had to restructure.

"I moved to a percentage-of-profit model, and then realized in the first year, being profitable in retail is really hard," she said. "Especially at the beginning."

At Purpose, shopping is a guided experience, with in-store stylists helping customers find pieces that fit their style and confidence.

Today, Purpose uses a hybrid giving model: donating either 10% of net profit or 1% of all sales—whichever is greater.

"So whether we're super profitable or not, something is always going out," Johnson said. "I own the company fully, so the giving model can be exactly what I want it to be. That's how we've done it from then on."

From those first living-room sales, Purpose has now donated over \$550,000, with a long-term goal of hitting \$1 million.

"My goal when I started was a million," Johnson said. "What's cool now is that as the business grows, that number multiplies each year. We're getting there faster. I'm not very good at stopping to celebrate where we are—I'm always like, 'Well, we're not there yet!'"

Her team, including Marketing Director Kylie Danskin, is quick to push back.

"As a small business, giving over half a million dollars is huge," Danskin said. "Christie's ready to say, 'Okay, we're going to hit a million next,' and I'm like, 'No, wait, we're going to celebrate this first.'"

Giving Impact

Purpose's first nonprofit partner was Atlas Free, a Kirkland-based organization fighting sex trafficking worldwide and in the U.S.

"I heard about them at church right after Purpose started," Johnson said. "A friend of mine was really into researching nonprofits—where the money goes, how they're structured—and she dug into Atlas Free and presented it to me. We felt really good giving our money there."

Purpose's second major partner is Olive Crest, a foster care-focused nonprofit added in recent years.

"Their main goal is to keep children out of the foster care system," Johnson explains, "but they also support foster families and placements. They're growing in Washington, including a big contract covering the Spokane area. It feels really good to support that."

The connection between the two causes is intentional.

Models showcase apparel from Purpose Men, reflecting the brand's emphasis on fit, quality, and everyday wearability.



"A very high percentage of trafficked youth come from the foster care system," Johnson said. "So supporting Olive Crest also ties into our focus on human trafficking prevention."

The relationship isn't just financial. Purpose employees have served as foster parents; others have gone on to work at Atlas Free.

"Two of our main employees left Purpose and went to work for Atlas Free," Johnson said. "We're still connected. We haven't stolen any of their people yet," she jokes.

Customers as Co-Givers

Johnson is clear about the role customers play.

"The customer is the one that gives all the money," she said. "It's 100% their money. We couldn't do any of this without them."

At the same time, she avoids leaning on the give-back story as a marketing crutch.

"There's a part of me that doesn't want to sell it that way," she said. "I want Purpose to be so excellent at what we provide—our service, our styling, who we are—that people shop with us because of that. The giving is the cherry on top."

Her team shares milestones and impact updates, connecting customers to Atlas Free and Olive Crest.





"I like to say, 'Here's what's been donated, thank you so much,'" Johnson said. "But day to day, we're focused on doing the work really well so that we have more to give."

Styling as Ministry

Some of Johnson's most meaningful moments are quiet and personal. She recalls an elderly customer who shopped regularly.

"She was so frail, but she loved Purpose," Johnson said. "She was losing weight, she needed new denim, and it got to the point where I was physically in the dressing room, dressing her."

One day, Johnson gave her a ring as a small gift. When the woman passed away, her daughter returned to the store.

"She brought the ring and said, 'My mom has clothes in her closet she never even wore. She just came here because she loved it so much. She came for the experience.'"

"For me, that's the story of what we do," Johnson said. "Purpose was her happy place. We really took care of her."

Danskin said stories like that happen every day.

"Our stylists have those moments constantly," she said. "A mom who just had a baby, someone going through cancer, someone who's lost a spouse—when they walk in, your job is to be their friend immediately, to encourage them and help them feel beautiful. We don't just sell clothes."

Scaling Without Losing the Living-Room Feel

Today, Purpose is on track to close the year around \$9 million in revenue, with a clear path to \$10 million and beyond.

"Now I'm kind of on a revenue kick," Johnson admits. "We'll end this year around nine million, and based on our stores, we'll be over ten next year. I want to take that from ten to twenty pretty quickly."

The fastest path: opening more stores—both women's and men's.

"More stores is the fastest way to grow," she said. "It's the fastest way for our team to grow, and it's the fastest way for our giving to grow."

The Tacoma men's store is already Purpose's second-best-performing location.

"We thought women would shop for the men," Danskin said. "Turns out, men love to shop too. They want to feel confident just like anyone else."

For Johnson, the hardest part of scaling isn't real estate—it's people.

Purpose operates with an intentionally designed culture built on five core values that put people first, prioritize genuine relationships, create win-wins, celebrate often, and commit to constant improvement. That culture—embodied by what they call a "Purpose person"—shows up in everyday leadership and meaningful gestures, turning values from words on a wall into actions that support both employees and customers.

"Business is easy until people get involved," she

Purpose operates multiple retail concepts, including Purpose Men and Sincere by Purpose, expanding its mission across diverse shopping experiences.

said. "People are the best part of business and the hardest part. As an entrepreneur, you're constantly at your leadership lid. The next level is always something you don't know yet, and you have to figure it out."

But challenges are where the growth lives.

"Every mistake and every failure has strengthened the business," she said. "If I accidentally order way too much denim, that forces us to build a better buying system and get creative with a big denim event. A bad hire teaches you how to hire better next time. Opening a store that isn't the best fit might lead you to the best store you've ever opened. As long as you don't run out of cash," she said, "you can turn almost anything into learning."

Advice for Purpose-Led Entrepreneurs

"You have to be really profitable to do that," Johnson said. "I'd say, focus on being profitable—and then give the money."

She emphasizes product-market fit.

"Make sure you have something people actually want or need," she said.

And the most important trait? Humility.

"As a leader, don't walk into any room needing to be the smartest person there," she said. "Let your ideas be challenged. Let your team poke holes in them. If your people don't feel important and special, it's going to be really hard to grow."

Purpose started with fear—and learning to walk through it.

"At the beginning, Purpose taught me how to defeat fear," she said. "Taking an idea that doesn't exist yet and making it real is terrifying. I worried what other moms would think—my kids were little, what if it failed, what if people didn't like it? I learned to defeat that by taking steps anyway."

Twelve years, eight stores, and more than half a million dollars in donations later, those steps have taken Johnson—and the communities she serves—far beyond her living room. And she's just getting started. ■



Health & Wellness

The Holiday Visit

By **Jessica Hull** | Community Relations Director, Bay Pointe by Cogir

The holidays are a great time to visit and reconnect with your loved ones that you only see once or twice a year. When visiting your elderly loved ones, you might notice that their mobility has decreased and they're slouching more or napping through activities. Either way, you may be curious what are some other signs to look out for and what can be done? The holidays are a great opportunity to assess your loved ones well-being and provide support.

The Physical Signs

- Weight loss
- Changes in appetite or eating habits
- Poor hygiene – unkempt appearance, unwashed clothes, or body odor
- Untreated medical conditions – unaddressed health issues, such as wounds or infections

The Behavioral Signs

- Increased agitation and/or anxiety – unusual irritability, restlessness, or aggression
- Confusion or disorientation – difficulty recognizing family members, understanding time or place
- Mood changes – withdrawal, depression, or sudden mood swings

The Environmental Signs

- Unclean living space – clutter, dirty dishes, or unpleasant odors
- Unsafe conditions – hazards, such as tripping risks or unsecured medications
- Unpaid bills or financial issues – overdue bills, unpaid debts, or financial exploitation

The Cognitive Signs

- Memory lapses – forgetting recent events, appointments, or important dates
- Difficulty with daily tasks – struggling

with cooking, bathing, or managing medications

- Communication challenges – difficulty finding words, following conversations, or repeating oneself

In addition to these signs, there are some other physical signs to look out for that may indicate that your loved one needs additional support:

- Frequent hospitalizations – multiple ER visits or hospital stays
- Increased fatigue – decreased energy or motivation
- Changes in sleep patterns – sleeping more or less than usual
- Difficulty with daily tasks – struggling with cooking, bathing, or managing medications

What Can You Do?

There are several options that you can do to help provide and encourage support to your loved one if you notice any of the above signs. Approaching

the conversation may seem heady but rest assured, you are coming from a good place and deep down, they know that. Choosing the right time and place to have the conversation that you have noticed concerning changes will provide comfort for your loved one and ensure that they are calm.

Express your concern and lean into it being encouraging and not criticizing.

Focus on your loved one and the concern for their well-being. Redirect as needed. Use active listening to encourage your loved one to share their thoughts and feelings on what is happening and what they are experiencing. It could be that what they are experiencing and their truth is the opposite of what you are seeing.

Focus on the benefits by emphasizing the support that they could receive, such as increased safety and socialization; especially in a senior living community. The important thing is to take it slow. Don't push for any immediate decisions and allow them time to process and consider what you are saying.

Resources To Support YOU

1. **The National Institute on Aging (NIA):** Offers information on senior care options and support
 2. **Alzheimer's Association:** Offers resources and guidance for caregivers and individuals with dementia
 3. **Area Agency on Aging (AAA):** Visit your local AAA that offers information and support for seniors and caregivers
- As always, call and visit your local senior living communities for tours, lunches, and information! ■





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South Kitsap students visit Pearl Harbor during a history-focused trip made possible with support from the South Kitsap Public Education Foundation.



South Kitsap's Best-Kept Secret

The Foundation Powering Opportunity in Local Schools

Photos Courtesy of South Kitsap School District

By Quinn Propst

Ward Media Staff Reporter

When school budgets tighten, the first things to disappear are often the experiences that define childhood: field trips, performances, hands-on projects, and opportunities to see life beyond the classroom walls.

In South Kitsap, a small but steadily growing nonprofit has quietly spent years filling that gap—funding the “extras” that increasingly feel essential to a well-rounded education.

The South Kitsap Public Education Foundation (SKPEF) is not a large organization with paid staff or a sizable endowment. It is an all-volunteer group of community members, educators, and district leaders committed to keeping opportunities flowing to students and teachers when traditional funding falls short.

“Our informal mission really has been, for several years, to support the district in areas where there’s a lack of funding,” Jay Seaton, board president of the South Kitsap Public

Education Foundation, said. “The foundation has really stepped in with a focus on helping those types of activities continue.”

Filling the Gaps

Formally, the foundation’s mission is to “invest in projects to enhance the quality of education in the South Kitsap School District” and to “give students the opportunities to excel in learning and develop, and focus the community’s resources to achieve excellence in education,” Amy Miller, board member and Public Information Officer for South Kitsap School District, said.

In practice, that mission translates into funding the space between what the district can afford and what teachers and students know would make learning more meaningful.

Seaton traces the foundation’s expanding role to the 2008 financial crisis, when enrichment programs and field trips were among the first casualties of budget cuts.

“We all went on field trips without even thinking about it,” he said. “When the money’s gone, that stops. I really enjoy seeing the kids being able to do those things.”

Today, the foundation’s core work centers on classroom grants. Teachers from any of the district’s 17 schools can apply for funding for projects, materials, technology, or experiences that directly benefit students.

“Each year we tend to average about \$30,000 per grant request cycle that we give out to classrooms,” Seaton said. “That’s \$30,000 in trips, in microscopes, iPads—the things that students are currently using and needing above and beyond.”

The foundation also awards scholarships to graduating seniors and occasionally supports large, one-time projects when major donors step forward—such as a contribution of more than \$100,000 that helped renovate the South Kitsap High School theater.

Leadership Grounded in Schools and Community

The foundation’s close alignment with district needs is intentional. Its leadership is deeply rooted in both the school system and the South Kitsap community.

Seaton, who has served as board president for about a decade, raised his



Members of the South Kitsap High School theater program thank the foundation for its support of arts education.

three sons in the district and spent 20 years coaching youth sports.

"I've been very involved with them and with their teachers," he said. "I have a passion for youth, and I think the work we do is just very important in helping the youth of the district be able to do the things they're wanting to do."

Board member Liz Sebren brings the perspective of a longtime educator. She taught in the South Kitsap School District for 26 years, served four years on the school board, and later joined the foundation.

"I really believe that public education is a foundation for our whole civil society," Sebren said. "I see a big need for teachers to feel supported by the community, and I think that this foundation is helping to connect the community to the teachers and to the schools."

"I really connect with what Liz was saying," Miller said. "Connecting local businesses to our schools, and showing the importance of the success of the school system to the success of local businesses and the future of our community—it's all tied together."

For Superintendent Tim Winter, the foundation represents both a practical partner and a visible sign of community commitment.

"I've always said the strength of our school district is directly related to the strength of our community, and vice versa," Winter said. "When you have people who are willing to serve on the foundation to serve kids and give them opportunities, I'm just really proud of the relationship that we have."

Experiences That Expand Possibility

Ask foundation leaders about impact, and many of the examples center on experiences students might never otherwise have.

Outdoor education is one such area. Funding for elementary outdoor school has disappeared from many district budgets, including South Kitsap's.

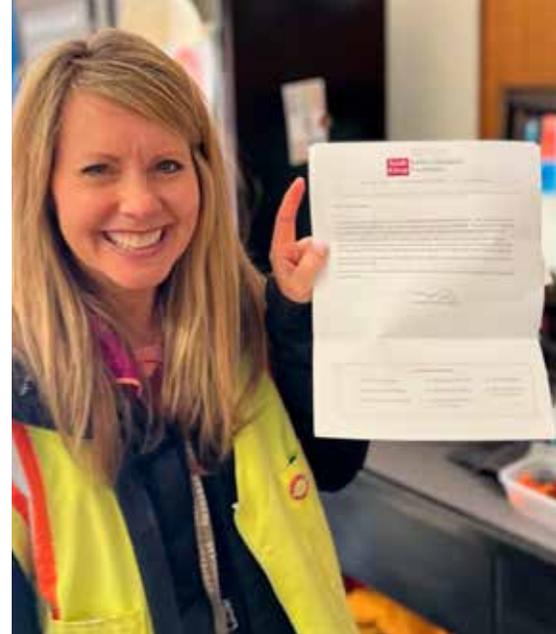
"We were able to help out three of our elementary schools so they can send those kids to their outdoor camp this year," Sebren said. "That's really important for community building for the students."

The arts have also been a major beneficiary. The foundation has helped underwrite trips for South Kitsap High School's music programs, including the orchestra traveling to Washington, D.C. and California, the marching band visiting Pearl Harbor, and the choir performing at Carnegie Hall.

"Students from Kitsap County, they wouldn't have the opportunity to do those things otherwise," Miller said. "I think that really makes for a well-rounded education that students may not have the opportunity to get otherwise."

Sometimes the impact is quieter but just as meaningful. Miller recalled stories from a California orchestra trip funded in part by the foundation.

"Some of those kids had never been across the Narrows Bridge," she said.



The South Kitsap Public Education Foundation helps schools bridge funding gaps, supporting programs and experiences beyond district budgets.

"People who chaperoned the trip said they witnessed firsthand the awe on kids' faces."

College and career exploration is another focus. SKPEF has funded field trips that allow students to visit colleges and community colleges.

"We got letters from the students who took part in that," Sebren said. "Some of them said they hadn't even considered that college was something they were looking to, or they thought it had to be a four-year college. The community college offers so many different things. It helped them refocus on their future in a different way."

The foundation also supports students with special needs.

"Some of our grants have gone for special needs students—technology and different things that



aren't funded by the school district," Sebren said. "It helps enhance their education and their teachers' ability to reach them and give them quality education."

Flexible, Focused, and Accountable

One of SKPEF's greatest strengths is agility.

"Several of those trips we supported, we were approached weeks before the trip was happening for a \$10,000 need," Seaton said. "Our foundation is nimble enough, and our scope is broad enough, that we're able to make that decision in a hurry and say, yes, we'll give you \$10,000 for this trip last minute."

That flexibility is balanced by a careful vetting process. With both the superintendent and district PIO on the board, grant requests are reviewed against district priorities, curriculum, and existing funding sources.

"We look into every resource that's available to these teachers," Seaton said. "If it's a grant request that we may not necessarily fund, we're able to find where that teacher should be going for those funds."

Grant decisions prioritize student reach, alignment with district focus areas, and long-term value.

"It's the number of students impacted, making sure it has long-term value," Miller said. "It's not just a one off thing. It's going to fill a specific need for that school's community."

Measuring Impact and Raising Awareness

For years, much of the foundation's work happened quietly.

"Unfortunately, in the past, I don't think the community has been as aware of the benefits that the foundation offers the district," Seaton said.

Financially, the foundation's giving has become consistent. In a recent year, SKPEF awarded about \$27,000 in scholarships and contributed roughly \$10,500 toward an orchestra trip, according to Sebren.

Fundraising is also gaining traction. Last year, the foundation's signature event netted just over \$58,000.

"Our goal this year is to double that through business sponsorships," Seaton said. "We're looking for \$50,000 in corporate sponsorships."

That shift requires reaching beyond small local donors.

"It's going to be difficult to find a business in Port Orchard that wants to donate \$25,000 as the event sponsor," Seaton said. "We have to look at something a little bit bigger, because small businesses just aren't going to do the \$25,000 level."

Storytelling, leaders say, will be critical.

"We are a great secret in Kitsap County and Pierce County," Winter said. "There are amazing things happening in our school district that we're trying to promote from within, but I think the foundation allows us an opportunity to add another level of promotion and recognition of what's happening in our schools."

Looking Ahead

Despite its reach, SKPEF remains entirely volunteer-run.

"We are all volunteers," Seaton said. "We have never had a paid position on this foundation. So we're looking at, now, 25 years since the foundation has been around, getting a paid staff member."

The board is working to expand committees and reach out to alumni.

"One of the goals is to focus on the committees that we need and then bring

volunteers in, rather than our board doing most of the footwork," Sebren said. "We're also trying to start reaching out to alumni from the South Kitsap School District to get them more involved."

Long-term, leaders envision building an endowment large enough to sustain annual giving.

Ultimately, the foundation's leaders see their work as part of a larger effort to build trust and long-term support for public education.

"We want to pass a bond, long term, big vision," Seaton said. "If we get enough community support and enough people that believe in the district and what the district's doing and see the value in what we're providing to the kids, then those levies and bonds are no-brainers."

"The foundation helps us build trust and build relationships," Winter said. "That leads us toward what Jay is talking about."

For a district still navigating limited resources and growing needs, the South Kitsap Public Education Foundation has become a quiet but powerful bridge connecting community support with real opportunities for students, and strengthening South Kitsap's future in the process. ■



Students attend Space Camp with assistance from the South Kitsap Public Education Foundation, expanding hands-on learning beyond the classroom.



The South Kitsap Public Education Foundation receives the Washington Association of School Administrators Community Leadership Award on April 21 at the Suquamish Clearwater Casino, recognizing its contributions to public education.

The Ecosystem Edge

INSIGHTS FOR BUILDERS, BACKERS, AND BELIEVERS

Insights and ideas from Matchstick Lab and across Kitsap's entrepreneurial ecosystem—by, for, and about the people building what's next.

The Human Blueprint for Kitsap's Next Era

Growth is All About People

By **Stacy Luckensmeyer** | Certified EOS Implementer at EOS Worldwide | Advisory Board Member, Matchstick Lab

Last year, entrepreneurs converged for the inaugural Matchstick Lab Firebrand Unconference in Poulsbo, and something powerful happened. In a room built not for pitching, but for truth-telling, founders named what keeps them up at night: hiring, scaling, capital, burnout, and the deep desire for community. The Playbook that followed didn't just outline business challenges — it revealed a human one: Entrepreneurship, at its core, is a **people** journey.

At the 2025 Firebrand Unconference in November, that truth sharpened into four key dimensions of growth that our attendees identified as discussion topics for the day. Through a series of facilitated group conversations, we dove into these openly to reveal how we grow stronger businesses by growing people, including ourselves.

1. Growing the People Who Work Alongside You

Discussions at the Firebrand 2024 Unconference made it clear: talent is the single greatest constraint and catalyst to growth. Business owners spoke candidly about struggling to hire, train, and retain in emerging sectors like tech, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing. They didn't ask for handouts but for pipelines, mentorship, and upskilling.

The focus of this year's discussions on growing employees is not new. It is the continuation of a mandate issued by

founders themselves: build the workforce locally, invest deeply, and lead human-first.

2. Growing the Ecosystem That Supports You

Collaboration matters. Last year's entrepreneurs named isolation as both a personal and economic risk: too few shared spaces, too much fragmentation, not enough collision between ideas.

The Firebrand Unconference proved what's possible when walls come down. This year, growing the ecosystem brought forward specific ideas around coworking, mentorship, capital networks, family-friendly spaces, and cross-sector partnerships that make entrepreneurship visible, accessible, and shared.

3. Growing Clients While Serving Well

Sustainable growth was a recurring tension in 2025. How do you scale without breaking culture? How do you innovate without losing operational footing? How do you grow without burning out?

This year, entrepreneurs were focused, not on client volume for their own sake, but on building businesses of enduring value, rooted in service, trust, and community impact. This mirrors what founders continue to say they want to protect.

4. Growing Yourself as the Entrepreneur

Perhaps the most powerful room, both this year and last year, was the "Oxygen

Mask" session where entrepreneurs spoke openly about imposter syndrome, anxiety, exhaustion, and the cost of always being "on."

The message was unmistakable: thriving businesses require thriving founders. Growth that ignores the human behind the hustle is not growth, it becomes erosion of that entrepreneur. This year's commitment to personal growth as a core business strategy signals a cultural shift from endurance to sustainability.

The Throughline? People Power Everything

To have a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, we need talent, density, culture, capital,

and a supportive regulatory

environment. These depend on

people to activate it, and the

Call Forward in 2025 came

out of an energizing day

with inspiring ideas:

- If you're a founder, invest in your team and in yourself with equal seriousness.

- If you're a community partner, build spaces, capital pathways, and support structures

that reduce isolation.

- If you're an investor or policymaker, fund people, not just projects.

The Firebrand Unconference is two years strong, and it was never meant to be a moment. It's a movement. And movements don't grow through programs alone; they grow through people choosing, again and again, to build together.

The next era of growth is here. It looks human. It looks connected. And it's ours to lead together. ■





Annual Business Awards Gala

Nearly 350 people packed the ballroom of the Kitsap Conference Center on December 12th to celebrate at the Greater Kitsap Chamber's Annual Business Awards Gala. With more than 130 nominations, 42 finalists, and 6 award categories, the night marked the culmination of a successful year for businesses and nonprofits across the region.



New this year, the Chamber awarded both large and small-sized awards to recipients in the Pioneer Business of the Year and the Natalie E. Bryson Business of the Year categories. Altogether, eight area businesses and nonprofits were recognized as the top winners for 2025, including:

Pioneer Business of the Year
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Pacific Northwest
Title



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Hospitality Business of the Year

The Resort at Port Ludlow

Nonprofit of the Year

Kitsap Regional Library Foundation

Event/Festival of the Year

Kitsap Halloween Bash

The event also serves as the Chamber's sole fundraiser of the year, raising crucial funds to support many of the programs the organization hosts for members and the larger

business community throughout the year, including the first-ever Ready Kitsap: Business & Tourism Summit set for January 15th. ■



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GKC Around the Community



The Greater Kitsap Chamber was excited to join the holiday festivities at Downtown Bremerton Association's Winterfest on November 29. Thanks to everyone who stopped by and visited our tent!



The Greater Kitsap Chamber hosted its Annual Elected Leaders Breakfast on December 10 at Kitsap Golf & Country Club. Thank you to the elected officials and Chamber members who joined us. These conversations between business leaders and policymakers are essential to building a stronger, more connected Kitsap.



TUESDAY, JANUARY 27, 2026

Join the Chamber at AWB's Legislative Day & Hill Climb

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Growth

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Integrity Roofing & Construction (2024)

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General Dynamics Electric Boat

- (2024)
- Independent Scentsy Consultant - Denise Steele (2019)
- Martha & Mary (2017)
- Navy Federal Credit Union (2003)
- Nordic Hill Manor (2024)
- Reliable Storage - Kitsap County (1989)
- Business
- BECU – Silverdale (2004)
- Blue Sky Printing (1992)
- Friedman Rubin, PLLP** (2025)
- Kitsap History Museum (1995)
- Monica's Waterfront Bakery & Café** (2025)
- Pangea Gardenscapes, LLC (2011)
- Suitcases on Standby Travel (2021)
- The Female Tribe LLC dba (Waxing The City)** (2025)
- The Kids' Dentist Silverdale (2023)
- The Refuge Church** (2025)
- Yacht Club Broiler (1989)

Thank you for your continued support of the Greater Kitsap Chamber through your membership. Your commitment to the Chamber plays a vital role in strengthening our business community and fostering growth, connection, and advocacy across the region.

GKC Around the Community



Thank you to Integrity Roofing & Construction for hosting our November Chamber: Off the Clock and to Honeybee Horticulture for the delicious catering. It was a fantastic evening of connections and community!



Chamber leadership and community partners came together for the Bremerton Foodline Turkey Trot on November 27. From left to right: Jennifer Strong (Board Member), Marie Johnson (Rox Theatre), and Irene Moyer (President/CEO) provided water and encouragement to participants.



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SCAN TO APPLY TODAY

Washington Taxes:

The Expense We Pretend Not To See

By **Kevin Campbell** | Wealth Advisor & Founder of Peaks Financial, Host of Kitsap Matters Podcast, Author of *Fearless: Charting Your Course to Financial Independence*

Most people don't wake up thinking about taxes. They think about paying their mortgage, picking up groceries, planning a vacation, maybe hoping gas prices come back down someday. But here's the truth that most Washingtonians have never actually been shown: according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Consumer Expenditure Survey, for households making over \$140k per year, personal taxes are the single largest expense the average American pays at approximately 19%. Larger than housing. Larger than healthcare. Larger than transportation and food combined.

And that's before we even get into the taxes you don't see.

Washington likes to brag that it's "tax friendly" because we don't tax wages. That's technically true, but it's also wildly misleading. Because if you zoom out and look at the actual cost of living, you quickly see that Washington residents are being taxed from every possible angle.

Start with fuel. Once you combine federal fuel tax, state fuel tax, and the "carbon charges" added through the Climate Commitment Act, Washington drivers are paying close to one dollar per gallon in direct and indirect government-imposed costs. That means 20 to 25 percent of your fuel cost isn't fuel at all. It's taxes, fees, and "credits" that function exactly like taxes.

Fuel moves everything in our economy. Your groceries. Your building materials. The roofing company's trucks. The contractor's van. The magazine you're holding or the tablet you're reading this on. If you wonder why basic goods cost more here than in other states, fuel taxes are a big part of that story.

And then there's the Business and Occupation (B&O) tax, which taxes revenue, not profit. You can lose money running a

small business in Washington and still owe tax because the state taxes you simply for having customers. That is the opposite of business friendly.

Add in Washington's capital gains tax, which is essentially a selective personal income tax. It starts at 7 percent and jumps to 9.9 percent on higher gains. People can debate whether it's constitutional, but there's no debating the impact. Retirees, business owners, and long-time Washington residents are making financial decisions differently because of it.

But the single best example of how Washington's policies drive the cost of living is housing.

A recent analysis from the Building Industry Association of Washington found that regulatory costs now add roughly \$203,976 to the cost of building a single-family home in this state. That's nearly 30 percent of the median new home price.

That is not lumber. Not labor. Not land.

That is regulation.

If you're wondering why starter homes no longer exist, here's your answer. If you're wondering why builders can't put homes on the market fast enough, here's your answer. If you're wondering why rents keep rising, here's your answer. Homes are expensive because it is expensive to build them, and it is expensive to build them because the state made it expensive.

All of this — taxation, regulation, fees, delays — fuels inflation at the local level. You cannot regulate and tax everything in the economy and then act surprised when prices rise.

Recently, I was at a breakfast with several local elected officials. They asked what I'm hearing from people in my office. So here's what I told them: I am hearing from regular Washingtonians — retirees, workers, small business owners — who are thinking seriously about leaving the state. Not because they want to, but because they can't afford not to.

Washington doesn't just have a tax problem. It has a spending problem and a regulatory problem.

And instead of asking, "What more can we tax?" the real question Olympia should be asking is:

- What are other states NOT doing that we ARE?
- Where are they not spending money that we are?
- Where are they not creating massive regulatory burdens while we are?
- Where are they not making it nearly impossible for small business to compete while we are?

Where are they not adding over \$200,000 of regulatory burden to every new home while we are?

Washington is one of the most beautiful places in the country. It has incredible people. But people are starting to leave, not because they want to, but because they feel like the state they love doesn't love them back.

If Olympia doesn't want a slow-motion exodus, it needs to start asking the right questions.

Because when ordinary residents decide the only way to protect their financial future is to move away, that isn't a tax issue. It's a values issue. ■



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Real Estate

Kitsap County Real Estate:

2025 Market Wrap-Up and the 2026 Housing Forecast

By Tom Earnest | Real Estate Broker
/ Realtor John L. Scott Real Estate

As 2025 draws to a close, the Kitsap County real estate market has proven to be resilient, adaptive, and locally driven despite national economic uncertainty. Influenced by interest rates, inventory constraints, and continued demand tied to military, shipyard, and remote-work employment, Kitsap County finished the year on steadier ground than many expected. Looking ahead to 2026, the data points to a more balanced—but still competitive housing market for buyers, sellers, and investors alike.

2025 Market Recap: A Year of Adjustment and Stability

The defining theme of 2025 was market normalization. After the rapid appreciation and volatility of previous years, Kitsap County experienced a more measured pace. Home prices largely stabilized, with modest appreciation in most sub-markets rather than dramatic spikes. Well-priced homes continued to sell, while overpriced listings lingered longer, signaling a shift toward value-driven decision-making.

Inventory improved slightly compared to earlier years, but supply remained tight—particularly for entry-level homes, manufactured housing on owned land, and well-maintained multi-family properties. Days on market increased compared to the frenzied years of 2021–2022, giving buyers more time to conduct inspections and negotiate, while still requiring decisiveness on desirable properties.

Interest rates remained elevated relative to historic lows, but buyers adapted. Rate buydowns, seller credits, adjustable-rate mortgages, and creative financing solutions became common tools to keep transactions moving. Sellers who invested in property

condition, energy efficiency, and pricing strategy were rewarded with smoother closings and stronger buyer interest.

Overall, 2025 reinforced an important lesson: Kitsap County remains a fundamentally strong housing market, supported by stable employment, limited developable land, and consistent population demand.

Key Drivers Moving into 2026

As we look toward 2026, several data-driven trends are shaping the housing forecast:

1. Interest Rate Outlook

While no one can predict rates with certainty, economists broadly expect gradual easing or stabilization in 2026. Even modest rate reductions could unlock pent-up buyer demand, especially among first-time buyers who sat out in 2024–2025.

2. Inventory and New Construction

New construction will remain constrained by land availability, permitting timelines, and labor costs. This keeps upward pressure on prices, particularly for single-family homes. Manufactured housing and smaller-footprint developments may play a larger role in affordability solutions.

3. Price Growth Expectations

Forecasts suggest moderate appreciation rather than sharp increases. Well-located, move-in-ready homes should continue to gain value, while properties needing deferred maintenance may require pricing adjustments.

4. Buyer Behavior Shifts

Buyers in 2026 are expected to be more informed and analytical. Energy efficiency, insurance costs, and long-term ownership expenses are now core decision factors—not afterthoughts.

5. Investment and Multi-Family Demand

Multi-family and small investment properties remain attractive in Kitsap County due to steady rental demand. However, higher acquisition costs and tighter lending standards mean investors are underwriting more conservatively.

6. Job growth

The strongest driver of the housing demand. Currently Job growth is flat which tempers market momentum.

What This Means for Sellers in 2026

Sellers entering the 2026 market should plan for a strategic, presentation-focused sale. Homes that are properly priced, well-maintained, and professionally marketed will continue to command attention. The days of “list it and they will come” are gone, but motivated buyers are still active when value is clear.

What This Means for Buyers in 2026

Buyers may find improved negotiating power compared to prior years, particularly as inventory edges upward. However, preparation remains critical. Collaborating with experienced local professionals—lenders, inspectors, and real estate advisors who understand Kitsap County's nuances—will be a key advantage.

Preparing for the 2026 Property Tax Assessment Process in Kitsap County

As property owners prepare for the 2026 tax season, understanding the Kitsap County tax assessment process is essential. Property values are assessed annually by the Kitsap County Assessor based on market activity, property condition, and comparable sales as of January 1 of the assessment year. These assessed values determine property taxes due the following year. With market values stabilizing after recent fluctuations, some homeowners may see modest adjustments rather than sharp increases. Reviewing assessment notices for accuracy, noting changes in condition or use, and filing timely appeals when needed can help ensure a fair and accurate tax bill in 2026. We will have more to follow in next month's issue.



The Bottom Line

The transition from 2025 to 2026 marks a shift into a healthier, more sustainable real estate market for Kitsap County. While challenges remain, the fundamentals are strong. For those willing to adapt, plan, and stay informed, 2026 presents meaningful opportunities across residential, manufactured, and multi-family housing sectors. ■

Kitsap County real estate is no longer about speed alone—it's about strategy, data, and long-term vision.

Feature

Jet on the Job

How a Poulsbo Comfort Dog and a Local Veterinary Hospital Are Redefining Community Care

By Quinn Propst

Ward Media Staff Reporter

The first thing most people notice about Jet is his size. The sleek, muscular Doberman looks every bit the serious working dog. But within seconds, that impression softens. Jet nudges a hand for attention, leans his full weight into a leg to snuggle, or settles squarely into a lap as if he's known the person forever. Whatever assumptions people bring with them—about police dogs, Dobermans, or even law enforcement itself—rarely survive their first encounter with Jet.

Jet is the Poulsbo Police Department's comfort dog, a role that puts him in classrooms, school hallways, community events, police offices, and sometimes the quiet corners where stress, fear, or grief linger. Keeping him healthy, fueled, and ready for that work is Animal Emergency & Specialty Center (AESC) in Poulsbo, which sponsors Jet's veterinary care.

That sponsorship means AESC provides all of Jet's physical exams, vaccines, medications, preventatives, and food at no cost to the City of Poulsbo or to Officer Justin Black, Jet's handler and the architect of the department's comfort dog program.

For Diane Gates, Leadership Administrator at Animal Emergency & Specialty Center, the partnership is less about visibility and more about values.

"This is our community," Gates said. "We're all pet owners and pet parents, and we want people who care about the community handling our pets. We want them to treat them the way we treat our babies at home."



Photos courtesy of Leah Thompson / Scandia Studio

Officer Justin Black and Jet, joined by fellow Poulsbo Police Department officers, present a plaque of appreciation to Animal Emergency & Specialty Center (AESC) to display in its Poulsbo lobby.

A Familiar Role: Caring for Police Canines

Jet isn't the first police dog AESC has supported. The hospital previously sponsored Kilo, a former Poulsbo police canine who became part of the hospital's culture.

"When Kilo was our dog, we even used his name as our security word," Gates said. "If somebody said, 'Hey, we need to page Dr. Kilo,' that meant call 911, because something was wrong."

The connection to Jet came almost by accident. Gates met Officer Black and Jet at PetsWALK, a Kitsap Humane Society fundraiser, where both were scheduled to speak.

"He had to get up and give a speech, and I had to follow him," Gates said. "Who wants to follow the dog and the policeman, right?"

As they waited, Gates began asking practical questions: Who was sponsoring Jet? Who covered his vaccines, food, and emergency care?

The answer was simple. Black was covering it himself.

"I said, 'Well, here's my card. Let's talk. Let's see what we can come up with,'" Gates said.



Jet leans in for affection, a hallmark of the comfort dog's ability to put people at ease.



The result was a comprehensive sponsorship. AESC covers Jet's annual exams, vaccines, blood work, all preventatives, and his food. If Jet ever needs emergency care, the hospital waives the exam and emergency fees and provides a 25% discount on all services.

For Black, who personally pushed to create and launch the comfort dog program, that support meant more than financial relief.

"I don't like handouts," Black said. "But they set it up in a way that felt really community-oriented. It didn't feel like I owed them something. It felt like they cared about Jet, and about what he represents for the department and the city."

Care Built for a Working Dog

Jet's job sets him apart from most patients. He's not just a pet; he's a working police dog and a community therapy dog, with physical and emotional demands that require thoughtful planning.

When Jet first came to AESC, Medical Director Dr. Michael Stone became his primary veterinarian.

"He went over everything with Justin about what Jet does in a day, what his activity level is, what his needs were," Gates said. "We adjusted his diet appropriately so that he wasn't getting too much protein, but enough protein."

Preventative care is tailored as well. Because Jet may interact with other dogs from different areas and environments, the team considers additional exposure risks when designing his vaccine and preventative schedule.

"Keeping the vaccines up to date is really important," Gates said. "His diet and preventatives, making sure he gets his annual exams and anything that comes up is seen immediately — those are all key."

Jet is young and healthy now, but AESC is prepared to adapt his care as he ages or as his role evolves.

Breaking the Cycle of Stress

Jet's role is simple to describe but powerful in practice: he disrupts stress.

"First responders, especially cops, are alone a lot," Black said. "We're in our cars, in our heads, going from call to call. You don't realize how long you've been stuck in your

Officer Justin Black and Jet pose with a plaque recognizing Animal Emergency & Specialty Center for sponsoring Jet's veterinary care.

own thoughts. Jet forces you to stop. He'll knock the phone out of your hand, sit in your lap, nudge you until you engage. It gives you that second of clarity you didn't know you needed."

That impact isn't theoretical. Black recalls one moment inside the department that crystallized Jet's value.

A front desk employee, a former dispatcher with significant PTSD, was having a particularly hard day.



A sign at Animal Emergency & Specialty Center reflects the hospital's commitment to compassionate, high-quality animal care.

"No one was really paying attention, but Jet knew right away," Black said. "Next thing I know, he's in her lap. I'm wondering where the dog went, and he's just been lying on her for however long. That was really powerful."

In schools, Jet has become a bridge to students who often keep adults and especially police at arm's length.

"The biggest impact has been with what you'd call the 'problem kids'—the ones with a stack of disciplinary reports," Black said. "I'm a cop, I look like one, and you don't expect those teenagers to open up to an officer. But they're drawn to the dog, not me. Jet gets them in the door, and then they start talking. You realize they're really just looking for discipline, boundaries, and positive attention."

A Doberman with a Message

Jet's breed was a deliberate choice. Black wanted a dog that visually aligned with law enforcement.

"I wanted something a little more representative of law enforcement," he said. "Dobermans were bred for personal protection, they're very focused on their person."

Jet, the Poulsbo Police Department's comfort dog, wears his working collar while on duty in the community.



Jet, a Doberman with the Poulsbo Police Department, combines an imposing presence with a gentle demeanor as he carries out his role as a comfort dog.

What surprised him was Jet's personality. "What I didn't realize was how touchy-feely and affectionate they are. If I'd known that, I might've picked a golden retriever," he joked.

Gates admits she had her own assumptions.

"I was surprised that a Doberman was chosen," she said. "But when you meet Jet, you instantly forget he's a big, scary Doberman. He's just like, 'Hey, I'm your new best friend.'"

That contrast is part of Jet's power. His presence changes the emotional temperature of a room and reshapes how people, especially kids, see police.

Where there were once whispers of "Uh oh, cops are here," Black now hears, "Go say hi to Officer Black," or simply watches a line form to pet Jet.

"They don't care about me," Black said, laughing. "They're not mean, they just don't have any reason to come talk to a 40-year-old cop at school. But they will absolutely go out of their way to see the dog. That opens the door for conversations that never would have happened."

Building the Program from the Ground Up

The comfort dog program didn't come easily. When Black first proposed the idea, the department's insurance carrier issued a firm rejection.

"I wrote the entire policy, laid out the program, documented why it would be good," Black said. "Then I had the rebuttal sessions: 'What if this happens? What if that happens?' We just went down every rabbit hole and dug our way out."

During that year-long process, Black personally covered Jet's costs and invested hundreds of hours into training. AESC's partnership eased that burden and sent a

signal that the broader community believed in the program.

"For me, their support makes it real," Black said. "It makes it real for my chief, for the department, even for my family. Instead of putting money into food and basic care, I can put resources into better training or tools that help Jet do his job."

Business with a Community Heart

Supporting Jet fits into a broader pattern of community involvement for Animal Emergency & Specialty Center. The hospital sponsors PAWS of Bainbridge and North Kitsap, Kitsap Humane Society, and a Bainbridge-based assistance dog organization. Staff regularly participate in events like PetsWALK and Poulsbo's Viking Fest parade.

"We grow, but we're a small community in our hearts," Gates said. "You have to have that feeling of being a trusted friend who just happens to run a vet hospital, who can help you in an emergency. That's how we want to live, and that's how we want to do business."

Gates sees the police canine partnership as a reflection of shared values.

"They're really interwoven with us," she said of Jet and Officer Black. "They're great spokesmen for us, because they show the kind of care that we give and that we walk the walk. We're not here for the money. We're here because we care about our patients and our community's patients."

Changing How Care Looks

The partnership between Jet, the Poulsbo Police Department, and Animal Emergency & Specialty Center reflects a broader shift in how communities think about wellness—both human and animal.

"We're so focused on the job that we forget to take care of ourselves," Black said.

"Jet is a stark reminder that we need to. Just seeing him unconsciously pushes us to consider our own well-being."

"I think there should be one (comfort dog) in every cop car," he said. "These dogs break down barriers. People see the uniform and assume tragedy or conflict. But most of the officers I work with—some of them are huge, intimidating-looking people—are the sweetest, most caring people you'll ever meet. Jet gives the community a reason to approach us and find that out."

For now, Jet continues his daily work: greeting kids at school drop-off, decompressing officers after long shifts, and quietly anchoring people in moments when they need it most. Behind the scenes, a local specialty hospital ensures he's healthy, strong, and ready for the next call.

"He gets the assignment," Black said. "And honestly, he's changing how I see this job and how the community sees us." ■



Animal Emergency & Specialty Center (AESC) in Poulsbo provides emergency and specialty veterinary care for pets across the region.

Why Every Business Needs a Marketing Plan for the New Year

By Amy Yaley | COO of Ward Media

A new year often feels like a reset button for business owners. We start January with good intentions, fresh ideas, and a desire to do things better than the year before. Yet many businesses move forward without a clear marketing plan in place. How many times have you thought about your marketing strategy but never put it down on paper? Every business, regardless of size, needs a playbook for its marketing efforts. That means being thoughtful about where marketing dollars will go. Are you focused on sponsoring school events to strengthen community ties, or do you need to attract an entirely new customer base? Without defining those priorities, marketing decisions are left to chance.

When there is no plan, marketing often becomes reactive. Opportunities pop up and decisions are made quickly, without a clear sense of direction. Efforts become scattered, messages lose consistency, and gaps appear in the overall strategy. This approach rarely delivers the best return on marketing spend. The good news is that a marketing plan does not need to be complicated to be effective. Starting with a simple 90-day plan allows businesses to break marketing into bite-sized, manageable pieces. Identify where in the year you need the most support, then build a focused plan for that period.

Marketing without a plan costs more than money. It leads to wasted spend, inconsistent messaging, and burnout. When you simply say yes to opportunities as they arise, it becomes impossible to properly

allocate funds to the tactics most likely to deliver results. Unplanned marketing also means missed opportunities, especially seasonal promotions or consistent brand visibility. If your business is not showing up regularly, your brand awareness becomes less impactful when a customer does encounter it. Marketing works best when efforts build on each other. A strong 90-day plan allows you to develop, execute, and evaluate. What worked? What did not? Where can improvements be made? Those insights can then be used to create the next plan. This is why marketing should be treated as a business discipline, not just a creative exercise.

At its core, a marketing plan provides focus and accountability. It forces businesses to think beyond the end of the month or the next quarter and prepare for slower periods in the sales cycle. A good plan keeps goals realistic and measurable, which is critical. Measuring marketing success is not always as simple as someone walking in and saying they saw your ad. In reality, customers rarely announce how they absorbed a message, especially for brick and mortar businesses. Instead, data becomes essential. Tracking trends, foot traffic, revenue, inquiries, and engagement helps tell the story over time.

A marketing plan also helps business owners say no to distractions and shiny objects. When an unexpected opportunity arises, the plan gives you a framework to evaluate it. Does it reach the audience you are targeting this quarter? Does it fit within your budget? If the answer is yes and resources allow, it may be a great

addition. If it fits but the budget is already committed, it becomes a note for the next quarter or the following year. The plan creates momentum while remaining flexible. It should be a working document that is updated, refreshed, and adjusted as new ideas emerge or tactics fall short.

For many small and mid-sized businesses, annual marketing plans feel overwhelming. A 90-day plan works because it is manageable and easier to execute. Three months is enough time to see patterns and gather meaningful data, yet short enough to pivot when something is not working. This approach encourages consistency instead of perfection and makes marketing feel achievable rather than intimidating.

A simple 90-day marketing plan should include a clear business goal tied to revenue or growth, a defined target audience, and a primary message. It should outline the core marketing channels you will focus on, campaign or content themes for the quarter, and the budget and time commitment required. Finally, it should define how success will be measured. Keeping the plan realistic and aligned with available resources is key to execution.

As each 90-day plan is completed, it informs the next. Results guide smarter decisions, marketing becomes proactive instead of reactive, and over time, businesses gain clarity, confidence, and consistency. Planning is a competitive advantage. Businesses with a plan consistently outperform those without one. Start simple, put it on paper, and let the act of planning keep your marketing aligned with your business goals. ■

Amy Yaley is the COO of Ward Media and the co-owner of Northwest Swag Works. She can be reached at amy@ward.media.





A new family business in Kingston: The Lounge at d’Vine Bistro

D'Vine Bistro transitioned over to new owners in 2025, becoming The Lounge at d’Vine. David and Amy Harvey and Jim and Chris Anderson wanted to see the wine bar continue to thrive and add to its draw as a community gathering place. Siblings David and Chris grew up in Kingston and wanted to share their love of good food and wine with Kingston. The Lounge is in the heart of Kingston and walking distance to the ferry. In addition to a carefully chosen wine list featuring many Pacific Northwest wines, they have added a delicious craft cocktail menu that changes with the season. The new chef, Marta Drummond, adds creative weekly specials to a tasty menu of entrees and small plates.

The Lounge’s cozy interior often features live musical guests, bingo, trivia, or other special activities to keep you entertained throughout the winter. As

the weather warms though, it’s hard to beat the view of Appletree Cove from the Lounge’s back deck as the perfect spot to relax with a glass in hand. You’ll probably want to linger longer than planned, which is when you’ll most appreciate their new menu additions like the roasted vegetables with burrata appetizer or opting for a full meal with entrees like the Prosciutto Melt or Gnocchi with Vodka Sauce. The Lounge is also the only Sunday brunch destination in Kingston, offering classics such as Eggs Benedict, Avocado Toast and Scrambles, along with drink specials such as the “bottomless” mimosa.

David says for 2026 they are excited to continue providing a friendly atmosphere for the surrounding area to enjoy good food and drinks among friends. Follow them on Facebook or Instagram (@theloungekingston) to stay up to date on their events and specials! ■



News from board

We hope you had a chance to enjoy the amazing Port of Kingston light display in December and want to thank all the volunteers who made Kingston Cove Christmas a success! We also want to thank our outgoing board president, Angela Clark, for her service and welcome Brennan Jacobson as our new Board president! We also welcome new board members: Alex Galang (Kitsap Credit Union), Dana Goodfellow (Mobile Notary Public/Kingston 4th of July), David Harvey (The Yard Fitness Club/The Lounge at d’Vine Bistro), Eric Croft (Noo-Kayet Investments), John Vorhees (Grocery Outlet), Michelle Cook (Windermere, West Sound, Inc.). Happy 2026!

Welcome New Members

- Cup & Muffin
- Friends and Neighbors Brewing

Human Resources

The Future of Leadership:

How People-First Leaders Will Drive Success in 2026

By Julie Piazza | SHRM-SCP, SPHR Anew Insights

As we look toward 2026, one truth stands out: the most successful business leaders will be those who embrace their role as people leaders. In a world shaped by economic uncertainty, rapid technological change, and evolving workforce expectations, leadership is no longer just about driving financial performance - it's about inspiring, strengthening, and connecting with people.

The Business Forecast: Human-Centered Leadership as a Strategic Imperative

The global business outlook for 2026 predicts moderate growth amid persistent volatility. Organizations will continue to face talent shortages, hybrid work challenges, and constant pressure to innovate. In this environment, leadership grounded in human connection becomes a true competitive advantage. Employees want more than a paycheck - they seek purpose, flexibility, and belonging. Leaders who prioritize these needs will unlock engagement, productivity, and loyalty.

Human-centered leadership is no longer a "soft" concept; it's a hard business driver. Companies that fail to adapt risk losing top talent and falling behind in innovation. Those that succeed will do so by creating cultures where people feel valued, heard, and equipped to perform at their best. This shift isn't just good for employees -

it's essential for business survival.

Leadership Vision: From Command to Collaboration

The traditional top-down leadership model is fading fast. In its place, a more collaborative, empathetic approach is emerging—one that positions leaders as coaches and culture-builders rather than mere decision-makers. This shift requires emotional intelligence, active listening, and transparency. In 2026, expect leadership development programs to emphasize these skills because they directly impact performance and retention.

Inclusive leadership will also take center stage. Diverse perspectives fuel creativity and resilience, and leaders who champion equity and belonging will strengthen culture while positioning their organizations to thrive in a competitive marketplace. When employees feel safe to share ideas and challenge assumptions, innovation flourishes.

Technology Meets Humanity

Digital transformation will continue to reshape industries, but technology cannot replace the human touch. AI and automation will handle routine tasks, freeing leaders to focus on what matters most: relationships. The challenge for 2026 is balancing efficiency with

empathy. Leaders must ensure that tech-driven decisions align with organizational values and enhance—not diminish—the employee experience.

Forward-thinking leaders will use technology to support people, not replace them. Tools like AI can personalize learning, improve communication, and streamline workflows. But trust, empathy, and connection remain irreplaceable. Leaders who understand this balance will create workplaces where technology and humanity work hand in hand.

Building Resilient Teams

Resilience will define successful organizations in the year ahead.

Leaders as people leaders play a critical role in fostering resilience by promoting psychological safety, encouraging adaptability, and modeling well-being. This means normalizing conversations about mental health, supporting flexible work arrangements, and investing in continuous learning.

Organizations that prioritize resilience will not only weather uncertainty - they will transform challenges into opportunities. Leaders who embrace this mindset will create teams that are agile, innovative, and deeply committed.

The Bottom Line

In 2026, leadership is personal. Business leaders who embrace their role as people leaders will not only navigate uncertainty - they will shape thriving, future-ready organizations. By prioritizing connection, culture, and care, leaders can transform challenges into opportunities and ensure that business success is built on a foundation of human potential. Forward-thinking leaders will leverage technology to personalize development, improve communication, and support well-being. But they will also recognize that trust, empathy, and connection remain irreplaceable. ■



Executive Q&A

Meet Diana Riggins

Business & Economic Development Program
Manager for the Suquamish Tribe

An aerial view of Clearwater Casino Resort along Agate Passage near Suquamish, one of the Tribe's signature waterfront enterprises.

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

Photos courtesy of the Suquamish Tribe

Diana Riggins brings a lifetime of entrepreneurial experience and strategic thinking to her role as Business & Economic Development Program Manager for the Suquamish Tribe. A business owner from a young age and a seasoned consultant long before entering public service, Riggins now applies those skills at a scale that reaches far beyond individual enterprises, helping shape the Tribe's long-term economic health and sovereignty.

In her position, Riggins oversees efforts to strengthen and diversify the Suquamish economy, working across tribally owned enterprises, municipal operations, workforce development and emerging sectors such as healthcare and energy. Her work is guided not only by financial performance, but by a generational view of economic development rooted in Suquamish

values, cultural stewardship and long-term resilience.

In this Executive Q&A, Riggins reflects on her path into economic development, the strategic priorities guiding the Tribe's investments, and the role the Suquamish Tribe plays as a major economic driver in Kitsap County and the greater West Sound region. She also shares insight into workforce challenges, regional partnerships and why successful economic development, in her view, must be measured by lasting impact rather than short-term gains.

To begin, can you share a bit about your background and what shaped your path into economic development?

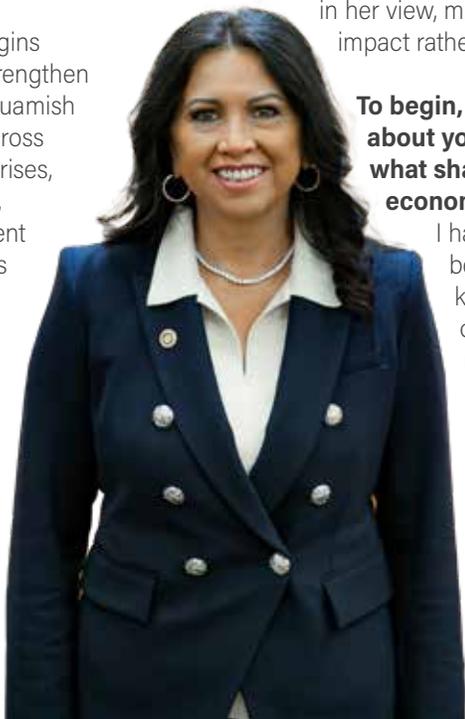
I have pretty much always been in business. As a little kid, I was the one knocking on doors selling things, running a lemonade stand, and even holding "summer school" for neighborhood kids when I was seven. At the time I did not know the word "entrepreneur," but that is exactly what I was doing.

I was identified as gifted early on, and at 16 the National Science Foundation sent me to college, where I studied Statistical Decision Theory and Quantitative Analysis on a path toward electrical engineering. My first corporation came a few years later, at age 20, a cable installation company in Seattle, and I have owned businesses ever since.

After decades as an entrepreneur, I went back and earned my business degree from Columbia Southern University to formalize what I had been doing in practice. Consulting with businesses to help them grow and stabilize is what ultimately pulled me toward economic development. I realized the same tools that help individual companies succeed can be scaled to help my own community, the Suquamish Tribe, and the broader region build long-term, sustainable prosperity.

How would you describe the Business & Economic Development Program and its core purpose within the Suquamish Tribe?

At its core, our Business and Economic Development program has a simple purpose: to grow and protect the Tribe's economic base in a way that strengthens



our sovereignty, our culture, and our families, not just our bottom line.

In practical terms, that means building a diversified economy so the Tribe is not dependent on any single revenue source. We look at tribally owned enterprises, real estate, municipal operations, tribal member owned small businesses, and new sectors such as healthcare and professional services. We focus on keeping dollars circulating in our community, creating high quality jobs, and investing in projects that will still be paying off for the next generation.

Just as importantly, we are intentional about how we grow. Our work is grounded in Suquamish values: respect for the land and water, caring for elders and youth, and creating opportunity without losing who we are. The program serves as strategist, connector, and advocate, aligning partners, funding, and policy so that the Suquamish economy is strong, resilient, and truly ours.

In what ways does your department collaborate with Port Madison Enterprises, and how do you align efforts while maintaining distinct roles?

Port Madison Enterprises is the business arm of the Tribe. PME is responsible for operating and growing our tribally owned enterprises day to day. My department, Business and Economic Development, looks at the larger picture, which is the overall economic base of the Tribe. That includes PME's businesses and other revenue streams such as taxes, permits and registrations, federal leases, healthcare, and tribal member owned businesses, as well as new opportunities in areas such as fisheries and energy.

We collaborate closely, but we each have clear roles. PME focuses on running successful businesses, including staffing, customer experience, profitability, and reinvestment. My team looks at where those businesses sit inside the broader Suquamish economy and what we need around them, such as infrastructure, workforce, housing, policy, and new sectors that complement PME's portfolio.

On a day to day level, that means we share data, ideas, and strategy. We might co-lead a feasibility study for a new venture, plan infrastructure that supports PME properties and surrounding communities, or line up grants and outside partners that help both PME and municipal or member owned enterprises. The goal is alignment without

overlap. PME keeps the engines running well today, and Business and Economic Development is making sure we have more engines, and more choices, tomorrow.

What workforce needs or shortages are most pressing, and how is the Tribe approaching talent development for the future?

Our biggest workforce challenges are less about interest and more about logistics. Even though we are quite close to Seattle, we are in a relatively rural area, so transportation and housing are major barriers for people who might love to work for the Tribe but cannot easily make the commute or afford to live nearby. Like many employers, we also feel shortages in highly skilled and

mentorship, strong benefits, and a workplace rooted in community and culture. People who work for the Tribe are not just taking a job. They are helping build a future for a community. That sense of purpose is one of our strongest recruiting tools.

What criteria guide your decisions when evaluating new investment opportunities or potential business ventures?

When we look at a new opportunity, we start with one core question: does this strengthen Suquamish sovereignty and our long-term economic base, or not.

In Indian Country, we often talk about the "seven generations." We plan for goals that will help not only our community today, but



Tribal leaders and partners cut the ribbon during the grand opening of Clearwater Market.

specialized roles, especially in healthcare, finance, and the technical trades.

The Suquamish Tribe has invested in education for a long time. Our fully funded college scholarship program for tribal members has created a well educated citizenry, and we have been very successful at hiring tribal members who live locally. Now we are focused on making sure those degrees and skills come home to tribal government, Port Madison Enterprises, and tribal member owned businesses.

At the same time, we know we cannot meet all of our needs with tribal citizens alone. We also need non-tribal employees who want to be part of something bigger than themselves. We offer competitive salaries, meaningful career paths and

also our children, our grandchildren, and those seven generations to come. Chief Seattle thought that way when he worked with leaders such as Doc Maynard and the Denny family to build what became the City of Seattle. We are now seven generations into the future he was planning for. If an opportunity does not hold up under that kind of lens, or if the answer is "no" or "not sure," we move on.

From there, my team evaluates a venture using a few key criteria. We look at financial viability, realistic returns, risk, and whether it diversifies our revenue instead of putting more eggs in the same basket. We measure community benefits, such as good jobs for tribal members, support for tribal member owned businesses, and whether it fills real

Executive Q & A

needs in areas such as housing, healthcare, or essential services. Cultural and environmental fit are non-negotiable. Any project must respect the land, water, and values that define us as Suquamish people.

We also ask practical questions. Do we have, or can we build, the capacity to operate this well. Can we leverage grants, federal programs, or strong partners without giving up too much control. How will this hold up in the next downturn, not just the next quarter. The best investments for us are the ones that pencil out financially and move the Tribe closer to a resilient, self-determined future.

How would you describe the Tribe's economic role within the broader Kitsap County and West Sound region?

As the third largest employer in Kitsap County, I would describe the Suquamish Tribe as an economic anchor for Kitsap County and the West Sound region. We are a government, a major employer, and a long-term investor all in one.

Through Port Madison Enterprises and our tribal government, we generate jobs, attract

visitors, purchase from local vendors, and invest heavily in construction, infrastructure, and services. Every decision we make about a new business, a facility, or a program does not just affect the reservation. It ripples out to contractors, retail, housing, healthcare, and other employers across the county.

Our economic role also shows up in the kinds of projects we choose to lead. Tribal investments in healthcare, public safety, and social services increasingly serve both tribal and non tribal residents. These investments help fill regional gaps while creating professional and middle income jobs close to home. At the same time, we bring a very long-term view. Protecting shorelines, salmon, and water quality is not only cultural and environmental work. It is also protecting the natural assets that make this region livable and economically strong.

So while people might first recognize Suquamish for our enterprises or as "the casino on the water by Bainbridge Island," our actual role is much broader. We are a stabilizing force in the local economy and a committed partner in building a more resilient future for the whole West Sound.

If you could dispel one common misconception about tribal economic development, what would it be?

The biggest misconception is that tribal economic development begins and ends with the Clearwater Casino and Resort, and that tribes are somehow a drain on the broader economy. The reality is exactly the opposite.

Yes, people know Suquamish for the casino, but we are first and foremost a government, and a very active one, representing our people locally, across the state and nationally. For the size of our population and land base on the Port Madison Indian Reservation, the Suquamish Tribe manages a municipal scale economy that more than triples the casino's economic footprint when you consider government services, housing, infrastructure, public safety, education, healthcare, and our other businesses such as construction companies, gas stations, the golf course, and Kiana Lodge.

Tribal economic development is not a special add-on to the local economy. It is a core driver of it. We create jobs, contract with local businesses, invest in major capital projects, and, like everyone else, we pay our share of taxes in many forms. Far from being a burden, tribal economies help stabilize and

grow regions such as Kitsap County, while also fulfilling our responsibility to care for our people and our homelands, including all of Puget Sound.

How do you measure success in programs that aim to build long-term capacity rather than short-term wins?

For me, success is not just having a strong year on the books. It is whether we are building a self-sustaining economy that gives future generations more security and more choices than we had. I am always asking whether we are strengthening our economic base in a way that will still make sense 20, 50, or 100 years from now.

We do track the usual numbers, such as new tribal member owned businesses, professional and technical jobs created, dollars we bring in to serve the community, and infrastructure and facilities completed. However, the deeper test is in our revenue mix. Is more of our budget coming from diverse, stable, long-term sources instead of being overly dependent on a single enterprise or outside funding? Can we reliably fund core services and community priorities without wondering if one economic shock will force us to pull back? Those are signs that our economic base is not just growing but maturing.

Another measure of success is alignment with our values. Are we using that stronger revenue base to meet community goals, such as housing, healthcare, education, and services for elders and youth, while still protecting our land, water, and cultural connection to this place? When our economy can sustain itself, support our people, and honor who we are as Suquamish, that is when I know our long-term capacity building work is truly paying off.

What recent or upcoming projects or initiatives do you believe hold the most potential for impact?

Right now, the projects I am most excited about are in the healthcare industry, because they touch families all across Kitsap County. The Suquamish Tribe is leading the development of a new behavioral health facility in Poulsbo, a full wraparound addiction treatment and recovery center that integrates medical care, counseling, and supportive services. It is designed not just as a clinic, but as a place where people can access the comprehensive help they need to truly rebuild their lives.



The Garden Atrium at Kiana Lodge is set for an event, highlighting the venue's role in conferences, celebrations, and community gatherings.



Kiana Lodge, owned by the Suquamish Tribe, is a beautiful waterfront venue for weddings, events and celebrations.

We have also recently acquired the Kitsap OB GYN clinic, which helps address a critical shortage of women's health providers on the peninsula. Together, these investments, along with our plans to further expand our health services, position the Tribe as a premier healthcare provider in the region.

For me, the real impact is twofold. We are filling essential gaps in care for Kitsap County residents, and at the same time we are building a strong, values driven sector of the Suquamish economy that will serve our community for generations.

From your perspective, what are the biggest obstacles to regional economic growth today, and what opportunities do you see emerging?

When I look at regional growth, I do not see a shortage of ideas. I see a few stubborn bottlenecks. Housing and transportation are at the top of the list. It is hard to attract and retain talent when people cannot afford to live near where they work or cannot reasonably get there. We also see gaps in healthcare access, childcare, and behavioral health that directly affect workforce participation. In addition, we still tend to plan in silos, with cities in one place, the

county in another, and tribes somewhere in the middle, instead of treating the whole peninsula as one interconnected economy.

On the opportunity side, this is exactly the moment to lean into those pain points. Healthcare is a major one. The Suquamish Tribe's investments in behavioral health and OB GYN services are part of a larger opportunity to build a regional health ecosystem that actually meets people where they are. There is also real potential in the blue and green economy, including sustainable fisheries, clean energy, environmental restoration, and tourism tied to the natural and cultural assets that make this place unique.

Another major opportunity is partnership. When tribal governments, local jurisdictions, businesses, and nonprofits align around shared projects such as housing, transit, broadband, and workforce training, we unlock federal and state resources that none of us could capture alone. The obstacles are real, but so is the chance to build a more resilient and diversified regional economy if we are willing to think long-term and work together.

Partnerships often play an essential role in growth. What qualities make for

a successful collaboration between tribal and non-tribal businesses or jurisdictions?

For me, the best collaborations start with a basic understanding: tribes are governments, not just another stakeholder or business partner. When non tribal partners recognize tribal sovereignty, respect our decision making processes, and take the time to understand who we are, everything else goes more smoothly.

From there, the qualities of a strong partnership look a lot like any good relationship. We need clarity, transparency, and follow through. We need shared goals that are written down, realistic timelines, and an honest conversation about risk, return, and responsibilities on all sides. The projects that work best are the ones where everyone knows why we are doing it, who it is supposed to benefit, and how we will measure success.

I also value patience and a long-term view. Tribal communities think in generations, not just grant cycles or election cycles. Partners who are willing to build trust over time, listen as much as they talk, and see cultural and environmental stewardship as assets, not obstacles, tend to be the ones we keep working with, project after project.

What does successful economic development look like to you, beyond metrics like revenue or expansion? What leadership lessons have been most influential as you navigate complex economic systems and partnerships?

Successful economic development, to me, is when our people and our homelands are healthier, more secure, and have more choices than they did before. It is when a tribal member can find good work close to home, access quality healthcare, live in safe housing, and see their culture reflected in the places and institutions around them. It is when our revenue is diversified and stable enough that we can weather downturns without sacrificing our values. It is also when every major decision is made with the "seven generations" in mind, considering what this will mean for our children, our grandchildren, and those yet to come.

The leadership lessons that guide me come from our ancestors as much as from boardrooms. One lesson is to remember who I serve. I am not just managing projects. I am carrying responsibilities handed down

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Canoes arrive at the landing site near the House of Awakened Culture in Suquamish during the annual Canoe Journey, a major cultural event in the region.

by people who fought for us to still be here. Another lesson is to listen more than I speak, especially across governments, cultures, and sectors. In complex systems, a leader has to be a translator, moving between business and government, tribal and non tribal, and between vision and implementation.

I have also learned to be patient and persistent at the same time. Real change in Indian Country rarely happens overnight. You celebrate the small wins, but you stay focused on the long arc. Finally, I measure my own leadership not by how much I personally accomplish, but by how many others I can help move into positions of influence. If, years from now, we have strong Suquamish leaders in every corner of our economy, and seven generations are still benefiting from choices we made today, that is what success looks like to me.

Finally, what excites you most about the work you are doing right now, and what keeps you motivated for the future?

What excites me most right now is that, after decades of

working around the country in business and economic development, I am able to bring all of that experience home. This work is not abstract for me. The Suquamish Tribe is my family, and as a descendant of Chief Seattle, I feel a very real responsibility to help carry our story forward in a way that honors our past and secures our future. Every project, from healthcare to small business support, is about creating opportunities for people I know by name.

What keeps me motivated is knowing that the decisions we are making today will shape life for our children, our grandchildren, and the seventh generation to come. I have spent my career helping other communities grow and stabilize. Now I have the privilege of using that experience for my own people and this place. On the hard days, I think about future Suquamish children who will have more choices, more careers, more housing options, and better healthcare because we stayed at the table and did the work. That is what gets me up in the morning and keeps me going. ■

Personal Development

The Game is Won Long Before the Shot Goes Up

By Dan Weedin | Consultant, Coach, and Head Dog Walker

One second left on the clock. You shoot. The buzzer sounds. The ball goes in. The crowd goes wild. Every kid who's ever picked up a basketball has dreamed of that moment. I must have taken that shot 10,000 times in my driveway growing up in Oak Harbor. I'm pretty sure it was how every session ended before I went inside for dinner.

That dream became reality for one young man recently. Grady DeVries is a high school basketball player at North Kitsap, and I happened to be on the microphone at courtside as the public address announcer. The game against rival Kingston had been tight all night. As North Kitsap held the ball for the final possession, trailing by one point, Grady - playing point guard - was directing traffic.

As the play unfolded, a teammate launched what he hoped would be the game-winner. It missed, caroming high off the rim. Players leapt for the rebound as the clock ticked down. The ball was tipped, and Grady, who had instinctively moved toward the play, secured it. With arms flailing around him and no time to hesitate, he put up a short shot from about six feet.

The ball dropped.
The horn sounded.
Pandemonium.

I was especially happy for Grady. He's also one of my high school golfers and a family friend. He now owns a memory that will last a lifetime. Better yet, it's on video, ready to be shown to future children and grandchildren!

Grady will rightly be celebrated for the made basket. But that moment was built on something less visible: process.

Everything he did leading up to that shot mattered. Had he missed, the emotion would have been disappointment instead of jubilation, but the process would have been exactly the same. And it would still have been right.

We've become prisoners of results.

Wins over losses.

Makes over misses.

Success or failure—right now.

Results matter, no question. But results don't show up consistently unless the process is sound.

Here's why that matters.

When the initial shot went up, Grady wasn't positioned where the rebound ended up. Instead of watching, he stayed active. He moved his feet. He

read the play. He remained calm in chaos. He put himself in position for something unexpected.

That's not luck, that's **preparation meeting opportunity.**

If he had stood still and spectated, there's no game-winner. The habit of movement, awareness, and engagement comes from practice.

From reps. From trust in the process. Even if the shot doesn't fall, winning the process over time produces more wins than losses.

So, what does this have to do with you?

Plenty.

In business, we trap ourselves with result-based thinking:

- Did we make the sale?
- Did we get the job?
- Did we earn the promotion?
- Did we secure the line of credit?
- Did we hire the right person?

Each one of those outcomes has a process behind it. When we fixate solely on the result, progress stalls, even when we're doing the right things.



One of the most important lessons I learned in golf was to stop obsessing over immediate outcomes. When working on a new technique, the early results are often ugly. If I tied my emotions to those shots, frustration followed: then stress, loss of confidence, and sometimes quitting the new technique altogether.

But by committing to the process, the results eventually improved.

So, what's your process?

How do you acquire new clients?

Improve your résumé?

Strengthen your financials?

Hire and develop the right people?

And what about life?

If you want to be healthier, there's a process involving nutrition, hydration, sleep, and movement.

If you want to be more present with loved ones, there's a process that includes putting devices away and clearing mental clutter.

If you want to improve a hobby like gardening, learning a language, or playing a sport, there's a process of learning, practicing, and applying.

The winning shot always starts with the process.

Grady has talent, no doubt. But talent alone doesn't guarantee results. Talent without discipline eventually goes to waste. What showed up in that moment was coaching, work ethic, patience, and process that was so ingrained it became instinct.

That same commitment is available to all of us.

When your game is on the line—professionally or personally—how will your process show up?

Are you ready to take the shot? ■

Join the Chamber in the New Year: Invest in Your Business, Your Network, and Your Community

A new year brings fresh opportunities, renewed energy, and the perfect time to invest in what matters most—your business and your community. As we step into the year ahead, the South

Kitsap Chamber of Commerce invites you to join (or rejoin) a powerful network of local professionals, entrepreneurs, and community leaders who are committed to helping one another succeed. Make

this the year you get involved, build new relationships, and strengthen your presence in South Kitsap. Join the Chamber in the new year—and be part of something bigger than your business. ■

The 2025 Business and Community Awards

Thank you to all of our nominees for the tireless work you pour into South Kitsap. Your dedication and passion inspire us every day. To our winners, thank you for the heart, integrity, and care you bring to everything you do. Your hard work does not go unnoticed, and we are truly fortunate to have such talented, driven, and community-minded individuals and organizations in our area.

A huge thank you as well to all of our attendees for the incredible food and book donations for South Kitsap Helpline. Your generosity helps support families right here in our community, and we are so grateful for you.

Seeing you, speaking with you, and celebrating alongside you warmed our



hearts. Our community amazes us every single day, and it's people like YOU who make South Kitsap such a special place. ■

2025 Community & Business Award Winners:

- Community Impact Award: Kimberly Shaw
- Excellence in Service & Leadership: Port Orchard Police Department
- Non-Profit Excellence Award: Fathoms O Fun Festival
- Small Business of the Year: Josephine's Mercantile
- Spirit of the Chamber: Rogelio Gonzalez, Financial Planner, at Prudential Advisors



Welcome New Members

- Care Net of Puget Sound
- Essences of the Thymes
- Port Orchard Roofing
- Oasis Bath Solutions
- Jack of All Tradez, LLC



VISIT Kitsap



Photo credit Wondercamp, courtesy of State of Washington Tourism

Visitors don't magically appear—**readiness creates revenue.**

As we step into 2026, Kitsap County is entering what the tourism industry calls a **demand year**; 2026 represents a **significant opportunity** that justifies positioning Kitsap and partner businesses to be ready, visible, and easy to choose when demand arrives. Major global events in Seattle, a strong cruise season, and continued interest in quieter, experience-rich destinations mean more people are actively looking for places like Kitsap. The opportunity is real—but only for businesses that are findable, prepared, and easy to choose.

In 2024 alone, visitor spending in Kitsap County exceeded \$500 million, and major events in 2026 are projected to drive thousands of additional room nights and hundreds of thousands of visitor days—putting even more pressure on businesses to be ready.

The good news? You don't need a massive marketing budget to benefit. You need to get the fundamentals right.

The Five Non-Negotiables of Visitor Readiness

Across the tourism industry, we consistently see the same five factors determine whether a business captures visitor spending—or loses it to a competitor down the road.

1. A complete and accurate Google Business Profile

This is now your front door. Travelers rely on Google to decide where to go and whether a business is open, accessible, and worth their time. Outdated hours, missing photos, or incorrect categories cost you customers—immediately.

2. Clear, consistent hours everywhere

Your website, Google, social media, and Online Travel Agency (OTA; i.e. Booking.com or VisitKitsap.com) listings must

match. Visitors won't gamble on "maybe open." Consistency builds trust and reduces friction.

3. Working booking or contact links

Whether it's reservations, tickets, appointments, or a phone number—make it obvious how to give you money. Broken or hidden links are one of the biggest revenue leaks we see.

4. Recent, authentic photos

You don't need professional photography to start. Visitors want to see now: your space, your product, your vibe. A few current photos taken with a phone are far better than none.

5. Active reviews and responses

Reviews are today's word of mouth. Responding—especially to neutral or negative feedback—signals care, professionalism, and reliability.

These five basics influence everything from search rankings to traveler confidence. Miss one, and you risk being invisible.

The Kitsap Advantage: Basecamp, Not Bypass

Kitsap's strength isn't about competing with Seattle—it's about **complementing it**.

Travelers are increasingly choosing places that offer breathing room, character, and access to multiple experiences without constant congestion. Kitsap's ferry-connected communities, walkable downtowns, waterfronts, trails, arts scenes, and Indigenous and maritime heritage position us perfectly as a basecamp destination: stay here, explore everywhere.

Post-World Cup draw booking data shows travelers are booking earlier and staying longer, favoring destinations that are easy to reach and easy to understand—an advantage for Kitsap when businesses are ready.

But that advantage only works if businesses clearly communicate how easy it is to get here, what makes their experience distinct, and why staying longer makes sense.

What Visit Kitsap Peninsula Is Doing

At Visit Kitsap Peninsula (VKP), our focus in 2026 is readiness over hype.

We're rolling out:

- **Short, practical business workshops** co-hosted with Ward Media designed for busy owners
- **Partner toolkits** with templates, checklists, and messaging support
- **Data insights** on traveler behavior, demand patterns, and booking windows
- **Regional storytelling** that positions Kitsap as welcoming, prepared, and worth the trip

Our goal is simple: help local businesses convert interest into real, measurable economic impact.

Do These Three Things This Week

If you do nothing else to prepare for 2026, start here:

1. **Google yourself.** Claim or update your Google Business Profile and confirm hours, photos, and contact info.
2. **Test your links.** Click every booking, reservation, or contact link like a visitor would.
3. **Add one "visitor-friendly" note.** Ferry access, parking info, walkability, accessibility details—small clarity goes a long way.

2026 will reward the prepared. The visitors are coming. The question is whether they'll find you. ■

BUSINESS Briefs



The new patient tower at St. Michael Medical Center in Silverdale adds 74 hospital beds and expands access to specialty care.

Virginia Mason Franciscan Health Opens New Patient Tower, Expands Hybrid Emergency Care in Kitsap County

Virginia Mason Franciscan Health has expanded emergency and specialty care access in Kitsap County with the opening of a new patient tower at St. Michael Medical Center and two hybrid emergency department and urgent care facilities in Bremerton and Port Orchard.

The new patient tower at St. Michael Medical Center adds 74 hospital beds, increasing capacity at one of the busiest emergency departments in the state and improving access to specialty services. The

expansion coincides with the medical center's fifth anniversary at its Silverdale location.

"We have proudly served Kitsap County for more than 100 years, and our commitment to expand access to care is stronger than ever," said Chad Melton, interim president of the Puget Sound Market for Virginia Mason Franciscan Health. "The new tower will bring even more services to patients, ease demand on our emergency department, and create more job opportunities for local residents."

St. Michael Medical Center is a Level III Trauma Center and includes a comprehensive cancer care center and medical pavilion offering a range of specialty services. The

Photos Courtesy of Virginia Mason Franciscan Health

expanded capacity supports growth in areas including spine surgery, orthopedics, obstetrics and gynecology, cardiology, gastroenterology and cancer care.

The expansion also brings workforce growth, with the addition of 10 physicians and more than 65 new team members.

In addition to the tower, Virginia Mason Franciscan Health has expanded its emergency care footprint through a hybrid emergency department and urgent care model. The health system opened its second hybrid location in Port Orchard, following the opening of its Bremerton facility earlier this year.

The hybrid model combines emergency and urgent care services under one roof, allowing patients to receive the appropriate level of care without having to choose between facilities. The Bremerton location has served approximately 15,000 patients since opening in March 2025.

The Port Orchard facility, located at 450 S. Kitsap Blvd., operates seven days a week. Emergency services are

available 24 hours a day, while urgent care operates from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. The site is staffed by emergency-trained physicians and nurses and includes onsite laboratory services, X-ray imaging and a multi-slice CT scanner.

The hybrid facilities are intended to help relieve pressure on hospital emergency departments while improving access to timely care for non-life-threatening conditions.

Virginia Mason Franciscan Health has also continued investments beyond hospital-based care. The system operates a family medicine clinic in Bremerton and supports physician recruitment through its Family Medicine Residency Program, which trains 24 residents annually, with eight graduating each year. Many program graduates remain in the region to practice.

The health system has also partnered with Olympic College, providing \$2.5 million to support the college's Healthcare Expansion Project and new Poulsbo campus, aimed at strengthening the local health care workforce.

Together, the patient tower expansion and hybrid



Virginia Mason Franciscan Health's Port Orchard hybrid emergency department and urgent care facility, offering 24-hour emergency services and extended urgent care access.



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emergency care model reflect Virginia Mason Franciscan Health's ongoing efforts to meet growing demand for care in

Kitsap County while supporting workforce development and access to services across the region. ■



The emergency department entrance at St. Michael Medical Center, one of the busiest emergency departments in Washington state.



A patient room in the new North Tower at St. Michael Medical Center, featuring modern design elements to support comfort, safety, and healing.



Doctors Clinic Expands OB/GYN Services to Meet Growing Demand in Kitsap County

The Doctors Clinic has expanded its Obstetrics and Gynecology department as part

of an effort to increase access to women's health and maternal care in Kitsap County.

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At its Women's & Children's Center in Silverdale, the clinic currently employs five OB/GYN physicians. The clinic has also opened recruitment for additional OB/GYN doctors, with plans to add a sixth and seventh provider to meet growing patient demand.

As the department expands, the clinic offers a broad range of services, including adolescent gynecology, annual exams and wellness care, prenatal care, fetal monitoring, labor and delivery, postpartum follow-up, high-risk pregnancy care, on-site ultrasound, gynecologic surgery, and general women's health services.

The clinic's recruitment efforts reflect increased demand for OB/GYN services in the Kitsap County area. Job postings indicate expectations for a

rapidly growing practice for new physicians, suggesting a rising need for women's health services in the community.

By adding providers and maintaining a wide scope of services, the clinic aims to improve access to continuous care for patients across multiple stages of life, including adolescence, pregnancy, childbirth and postnatal care.

The expansion is intended to support timely access to appointments for prenatal care, routine gynecologic visits and surgical services, while allowing patients to receive multiple types of care within the same medical group.

Recruitment for additional OB/GYN physicians is ongoing as the clinic continues to scale services at its Women's & Children's Center to meet regional health care needs. ■

Technology

Three Reasons Your Email Setup Matters

Plus Practical Tips for Business Owners

By Jon Hoehne | CMIT Solutions

Email remains one of the most vital communication tools for small and mid-sized businesses. Whether connecting with clients, vendors, or team members, your email reputation is crucial. But it's also a prime target for scammers, impersonation, and technical misconfigurations that can undermine your security and hurt your business.

Cloud-based email providers like Microsoft and Google are very convenient and provide many security features, but there's more work to be done. When you deploy an email security service, you get an extra layer between your inbox and the rest of the world. These applications send you separate notifications of quarantined or blocked emails.

Earlier this week, I got one such alert and it contained three great examples of email security and that many SMBs face. These examples highlight the importance of both recognizing email scams and ensuring your email infrastructure is properly configured. Ignoring these risks can lead to missed opportunities, damage to your reputation, or even security breaches.

Real-World Examples

1. The Look-Alike Scam:

One email appeared to originate from a reputable company, with accurate details I verified online. It requested a seemingly harmless action, asking only for a reply if interested, but what raised suspicion was a tiny detail: two letters in the domain name were transposed.

This scam is a classic example of a "look-alike" or "homograph" attack, where criminals register domains with minor differences. They then craft scam emails with real details about

company locations or personnel hoping recipients overlook the subtle differences in sender domains. Criminals exploit this to trick recipients into sharing sensitive info or clicking malicious links.

2. A Personal Gmail Posing as a Business Contact:

Another email was from a personal Gmail account. The email contained legitimate business details: correct name, company info, and an innocuous request, but the sender was using a personal email address attempting to masquerade as an official business account. For example, instead of expected name@company.com, it was company_official@gmail.com.

3. A Genuine Contact Flagged Due to Technical Configuration:

Lastly, I received a reply from a person I had previously contacted, a legitimate networking connection I'd just met the day before. The message was flagged because his email lacked DKIM and DMARC records. Two key components that mail servers use behind the scenes to determine email authenticity. Many cloud email services don't set these up by default, which can cause legitimate emails to go into spam or blocked entirely.

Why This Matters to Your Business

Misconfigured or insecure email setup can lead to missed opportunities, damage to your brand, security risks, and lost productivity as employees sort out why an email wasn't received or delivered.

Many of these issues are easy to fix with proper setup and awareness. Use your tech stack to its full potential. You don't have to put up with the wasted time of spam, scams, missed connections and other chaos caused by email issues.

Simple Steps to Improve Your Email Security and Deliverability

1. Use Paid Email Services

Use official email addresses tied to your domain, not free personal accounts. This enhances your business reputation, provides additional security features and supports business growth, even if you're a solopreneur.

2. Use Authentication Protocols (DKIM, DMARC, SPF)

Implementing these protocols helps validate your outbound emails. Essentially, they tell email providers that your messages are genuinely from your organization.

- SPF (Sender Policy Framework) ensures your emails are sent from authorized servers.
- DKIM (DomainKeys Identified Mail) adds an encrypted signature to verify the sender's identity.
- DMARC (Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting, and

Conformance) tells receiving email servers how to handle failed authentication and provides reports on email activity.

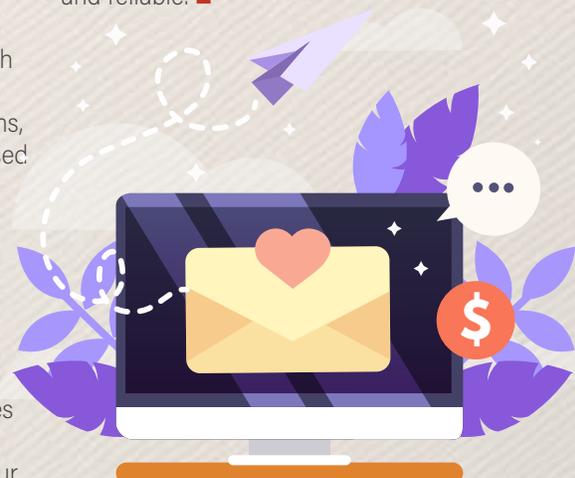
By setting these up correctly, your emails are less likely to be marked as spam or rejected, and you safeguard your brand from impersonation.

3. Use a Reputable Email Security Solution

Tools like Barracuda, Proofpoint, and others offer advanced features such as malware scanning, whitelisting, and attack detection beyond basic spam filtering. Regularly review quarantine folders and set alerts for suspicious activity.

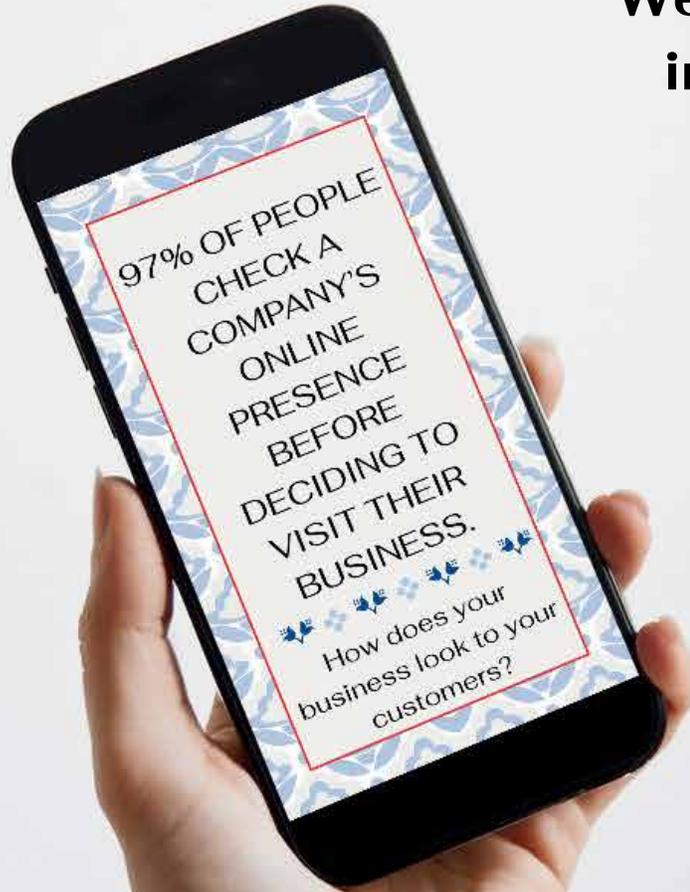
DIY or Expert Help?

Whether you prefer a DIY approach or want assistance from an expert, it's worth reviewing your email security setup. Don't wait until the next issue impacts your business. Evaluate your current settings today, consider adding an email security service, or work with a trusted partner to ensure your email infrastructure is protected and reliable. ■





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