

KITSAP

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Cover photography: Olya Blase

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Building confidence and community through dance

Peninsula Dance is creating more than a place to learn steps. Through instruction, performance and a focus on personal growth, the business gives Kitsap dancers opportunities to develop their skills, build confidence and find community while pursuing a passion for dance.

Building care around women

Evertide Pelvic Health puts women's specialized care at the center

Katrina Sudduth turned her own experience with pelvic floor therapy into Evertide Pelvic Health, a Poulsbo practice focused on women at every stage of life. Her approach combines specialized treatment, collaboration and community while addressing gaps in pelvic health care that can leave women searching for answers.

Erickson Events

Creating memorable experiences through connection and creativity

Erickson Events has built a business around bringing people together. Through thoughtful planning, creativity and strong relationships, the Kitsap-based company helps clients turn ideas into memorable gatherings while navigating the details and challenges that come with building an event business.

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Sometimes you just have to build it

There is a phrase we hear a lot in business: Find a need and fill it.

It sounds simple.

Of course, anyone who has ever owned a business knows there is absolutely nothing simple about actually doing it.

As I read through the stories in this month's issue of Kitsap Business, something kept jumping out at me. Again and again, the women featured in these pages saw something missing — in their industry, in their community or sometimes in their own lives — and decided to do something about it.

That takes more than a good idea.

It takes the willingness to bet on yourself.

Our Executive Q&A this month features Anna Bressi, managing partner of Restaurant Lola in Bremerton. Anna and her fiancé, chef John Hall, didn't originally set out to open their restaurant in Bremerton. Their plans changed, an opportunity presented itself, and they decided to take a chance on building the kind of neighborhood restaurant they wished existed in their own community.

What I especially appreciated about Anna's story is that she doesn't romanticize entrepreneurship.

She talks candidly about risk, sacrifice, margins, changing consumer behavior and the reality that the business you originally imagined may not be the business the market ultimately needs.

One thing she said stuck with me: Your original business plan is a hypothesis.

That's a pretty good description of entrepreneurship.

You start with an idea. Then your customers, your employees, the economy and occasionally circumstances completely outside your control begin editing it for you.

The entrepreneurs who survive are usually the ones willing to listen.

You'll find that same willingness to listen in our story about Katrina Sudduth, who recently opened Evertide Pelvic Health in Poulsbo.

Her business grew from something deeply personal. After experiencing pelvic floor physical therapy herself following childbirth, Katrina eventually moved her career into women's pelvic health. She saw firsthand both the difference specialized care could make and the gaps that still existed.

Eventually, she reached the point familiar to many entrepreneurs: Once you see the opportunity clearly enough, it becomes difficult to ignore.

So she built the practice she believed women in her community needed.

Then there's Loren Erickson of Erickson Event Design on Bainbridge Island.

Loren saw another kind of opening in the marketplace. There were plenty of resources devoted to weddings, but far fewer for the birthdays, anniversaries, family gatherings and smaller celebrations that make up so much of our lives.

She built a business around that opportunity.

Different industries. Different customers. Different paths.

But there is something remarkably similar about all three stories.

Each woman paid attention.

They noticed what people needed. They recognized where an existing model wasn't quite working. And instead of waiting for somebody else to solve it, they stepped forward.

That's entrepreneurship at its best.

I've spent most of my career around locally owned businesses, including owning a few myself, and I've become convinced that communities are shaped as much by these individual decisions as they are by any grand economic development strategy.



Forward THINKING

Someone decides a town needs a better restaurant.

Someone believes women deserve another option for specialized health care.

Someone sees an opportunity to help families spend less time managing life's important moments and more time actually experiencing them.

One business doesn't transform a community overnight.

But enough people making those decisions certainly can.

This issue celebrates women in business across Kitsap County, and I hope you'll notice something beyond the individual success stories.

Look at what these women are building around them.

They're creating jobs. They're filling gaps. They're supporting other local businesses. They're introducing new services and ideas. They're creating places where people gather, work, receive care and connect.

And they're taking risks.

That last part shouldn't get lost.

It's easy to look at an established business and see the finished product. It's much harder to see the sleepless nights, the bank balance, the missed family time, the uncertainty and the hundred small decisions that came before it.

Every locally owned business begins with someone deciding the possibility is worth the risk.

Sometimes the timing isn't perfect.

Sometimes the original plan doesn't work.

And sometimes the thing you set out to build becomes something completely different.

You listen. You adjust. You keep going.

And every once in a while, you look around and realize that the thing your community was missing is there now.

Because you built it. ■

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Keeping a legacy in motion

More than 60 years after her grandmother opened a dance school in Bremerton, Mallory Morrison is building its next chapter.

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

Running a dance school is one job. Running a nonprofit performing company is another.

Mallory Morrison does both.

Morrison owns Bremerton Dance Center, the dance school her grandmother, Lawan Morrison, started in 1964. She is also artistic director of Peninsula Dance Theatre, the nonprofit performing company that grew alongside the school and has shared its home, staff and community for decades.

She is also treasurer of the Ballet Alliance, the national organization to which both belong.

"So I'm involved in all three organizations," Morrison said.

The arrangement can be complicated.

But Morrison has spent more than a decade learning how to manage both sides of the organization — and increasingly, deciding what she wants them to become.

"When I first started helping out in the office, it was still ledgers," she said. "I still did payroll by hand, so I understood how to do all of that by hand, but now

QuickBooks does it all for me. I can now run payroll in 20 minutes instead of two hours."

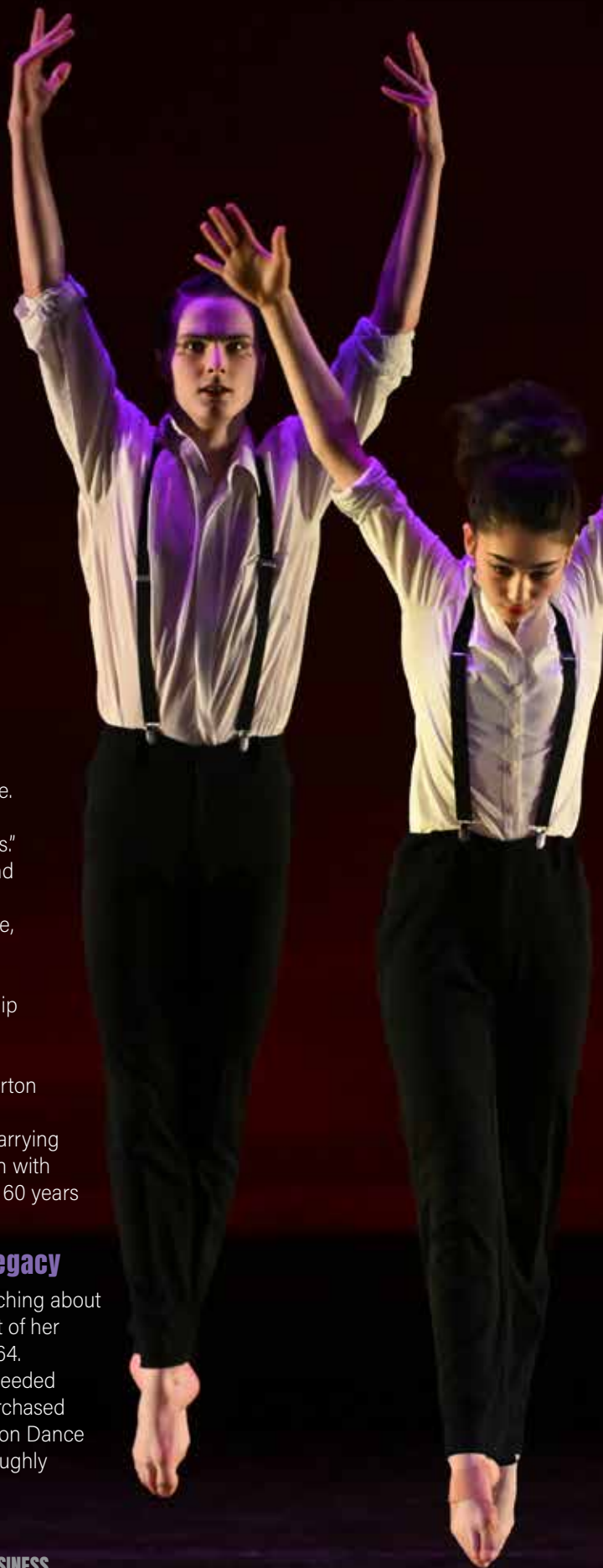
The changes go far beyond accounting. Morrison has built the school's first website, expanded its marketing, developed new ways for students to take on leadership roles and begun rebuilding Peninsula Dance Theatre's connections with the Bremerton community.

At the same time, she is carrying forward traditions that began with her grandmother more than 60 years ago.

Building on a family legacy

Lawan Morrison started teaching about 30 students in the basement of her home on Marine Drive in 1964.

As enrollment grew, she needed more space. In 1969, she purchased the property where Bremerton Dance Center operates today for roughly \$30,000.



"It blows my mind," Morrison said. "But I'm sure that was very expensive then. I'm sure it was quite the scary investment."

The building itself has an even longer history. Constructed as a church in 1904 about two blocks away, it was moved to its current location with horse and logs. The basement, Studio Two and the pastor's house were added by about 1917.

Lawan initially taught in a single room and rented out the rest of the building. As the school grew, she gradually took over more of the space.

She also worked as a travel agent and taught at the college while running the dance school.

"She had more days in the week than we do, apparently," Morrison said. "And more hours."

Lawan eventually built not only the school but also a performing company. Peninsula Dance Theatre was established as a nonprofit in 1973 after Lawan joined Regional Dance America, now the Ballet Alliance. The organization provided students with performance opportunities while allowing the school to participate in a larger network of dance companies.

Modernizing the school

Morrison began taking over more of the school's operations in 2013. One of her first priorities was bringing the business side into the modern era.

The school's long-standing word-of-mouth reputation remained valuable, but Morrison recognized that families were also looking for information online.

"It was very much a generation of word of mouth, which is very powerful," Morrison said. "But we have to get out there too."

She built the school's first website and expanded its marketing.

She also began organizing the school's archives and learning more about the students who came before her.

Bremerton Dance Center owner Mallory Morrison, left, works with Ballet Mistress Nicole Cisler. Photo by Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

"We have a lot of returning alumni that come to our shows. I want to make sure I know them and I know their history with the organization," she said.

That history is increasingly important as Morrison shapes the organization in her own way.

Her grandmother is now in memory care and no longer involved in the business. After years of primarily following the system she inherited, Morrison is thinking more intentionally about the future.

"I'm kind of at the point now where it's like, I need to figure out what I want out of the organization and what I want my legacy to look like," she said.

For the school, that means continuing to emphasize serious classical dance training rather than trying to compete by offering everything.

Bremerton Dance Center focuses on ballet, with tap, jazz and modern also available.

"We're not about tricks. We're not about how many turns can somebody do. We're not about flips," Morrison said.

Asked what sets the school apart, she answered simply: "Our training — 100%."

That training is a significant commitment for families. A child who starts at age 3 and stays through age 18 can represent a substantial investment

in tuition, with the weekly commitment growing from 45 minutes to as many as six days.

"You're not just showing up to take some classes," Morrison said. "It's an investment in your child's future."

Morrison is also looking at how the school prepares students beyond the studio.

Older dancers can become teacher assistants, participate in a mentorship program with younger students and receive formal instruction in choreography.

Recent graduates have gone on to the University of Utah and the Washington Ballet, where one became a trainee.

Keeping the staff and culture intact

While Morrison has modernized the business, much of the school's strength remains rooted in its people.

Every instructor on the current roster either danced professionally or came through the school.

Betsy, who taught Morrison when she was a child, has been on staff since the 1980s. Assistant artistic director Nicole and her husband both had professional careers, and he now teaches partnering.

The school also has staff working beyond the studio. Its onboarding specialist is an alumna who now lives in



A dancer takes the stage during Peninsula Dance Theatre's Nutcracker production. Photo courtesy of Peninsula Dance Theatre



Peninsula Dance Theatre dancers perform as part of the nonprofit company's season of productions. Photo courtesy of Peninsula Dance Theatre



Mallory Morrison carries on her family's legacy while shaping the future of Bremerton Dance Center and Peninsula Dance Theatre. Photo by Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

California and serves as the first point of contact for inquiries, guiding prospective families through enrollment.

Office manager Rebecca also serves as treasurer of Peninsula Dance Theatre after previously serving as its president.

And the connection between generations isn't limited to alumni.

Morrison's own daughter is a fourth-generation dancer at the school.

Families returning across three and four generations are one of the clearest signs to Morrison that the organization has built something that lasts.

Keeping the nonprofit moving

While growth is the focus of Bremerton Dance Center, Morrison sees a different role for Peninsula Dance Theatre.

"Growth is for the school. Community connection is for our nonprofit."

Keeping that nonprofit moving requires its own business strategy.

Peninsula Dance Theatre operates a season of productions that includes *The Nutcracker*, a choreography showcase, a spring ballet, a school tour and a season-opening fundraiser.

The dance theatre has performed *The Nutcracker* on the peninsula for more than 50 years, with live music from the Bremerton Symphony dating to the mid-1980s.

The company also takes performances into the community. Its school tour, a 25-minute assembly performance, has been running for roughly 20 years.

This season's school tour is *The Stinky Cheese Man*, a production Morrison originally choreographed when she was 19.

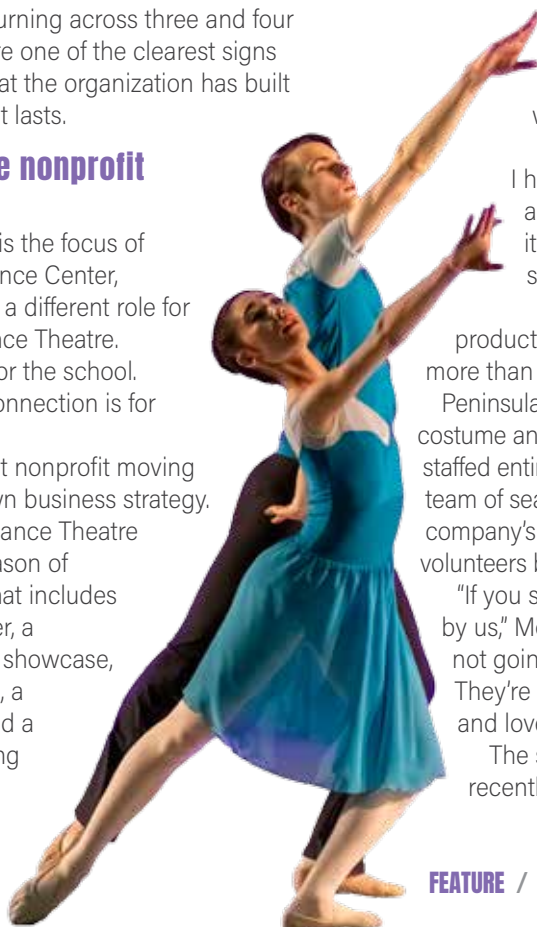
"I was like, Grandma, I have a brilliant idea, and she let me go with it. She trusted me," she said.

Keeping the productions going requires more than dancers.

Peninsula Dance Theatre's costume and set shops are staffed entirely by volunteers. A team of seamstresses makes the company's tutus, while two retired volunteers build props and sets.

"If you see a tutu, it's made by us," Morrison said. "They're not going to be recital quality. They're going to be cared for and loved and handmade."

The set-building operation recently moved into a larger



The Bremerton Dance Center sign marks the entrance to the longtime dance school, which has operated at its current location since 1969. Photo by Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

downtown space beneath Frog Soap, giving volunteers room to construct full sets and see how they will look onstage.

They are currently building a new *Nutcracker* cannon.

"If there's anyone out there in the community who likes to fiddle with things, let us know," Morrison said.

For Morrison, keeping those volunteer networks active is part of keeping the nonprofit sustainable.

Rebuilding community connections

One of Morrison's current priorities is reconnecting Peninsula Dance Theatre with the larger Bremerton community.

"I think we kind of lost our touch a little bit in the transition between my grandmother and I," she said.

She has joined the chamber and re-engaged with the Arts Council, efforts that have opened the door to new relationships with local organizations and businesses.

Spiva Cooking is creating a custom decaf *Nutcracker* blend to sell through the company.

The Bremerton Symphony partnership is expanding beyond *Nutcracker*, with the two organizations set to co-present *Peter and the Wolf* in the spring.

Kitsap Regional Library hosts company performances through its community programming. Morrison is also working to make the company's performances more accessible. A sensory-friendly *Nutcracker*, launched last year, features softened music, dimmed lighting, house lights at half, open doors and a calming corner.

She is bringing in an accessibility organization she met through the chamber to provide feedback.

"Give us some hot tips to see if we can make it better for our audience to enjoy," Morrison said.

The company also offers daytime school performances for \$6 a ticket and has participated in the Blackberry Festival's Kids Corner.

"We're just trying to see what our business can do for other businesses and vice versa," she said, "and just trying to build a better town."

Defining her own legacy

Morrison wants the school to continue growing and attracting families. The nonprofit needs dancers, audiences, volunteers, donors and community connections. Both need to maintain the traditions that have made them recognizable while adapting to the needs of the people they serve today.

And the two organizations continue to feed one another.

Students become teacher assistants. Alumni return as instructors. Parents volunteer to sew costumes and build sets. Graduates take their training into

dance programs and communities elsewhere.

"It's really cool just to see these little webs go out into the world," Morrison said.

For Morrison, the ultimate goal extends beyond producing dancers.

"I just want them to be able to have the confidence to be leaders themselves — to go out there and be successful and be proud of what they do, because they put so much hard work into what they do here," she said.

"Whether it's moving on to a career in ballet or dance, or going in a different direction, I just want them to have the confidence to take a chance." ■



Bremerton Dance Center operates inside a historic building originally constructed as a church in 1904 and moved to its current location.

Photo by Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio



Peninsula Dance Theatre dancers perform onstage as part of the company's ongoing performance season. Photo courtesy of Peninsula Dance Theatre



Ballet Mistress Nicole Cisler teaches a class at Bremerton Dance Center, where classical ballet remains at the heart of the school's training. Photo by Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

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One of the most successful people I knew owned almost an entire city block in greater Seattle. When he sadly passed away, at the memorial service one of his daughters shared with everyone the best advice their father ever gave her. Her story surprised me and it stuck with me: "Don't waste your 20's." She went on to say, "Do what you love in your 20's and figure out how to monetize it in your 30's." It changed my perspective on what success looks like.

We have two teenagers and a pre-teen in the house and we are in the thick of talking with them about what the next 10 years could look like. Brainstorming, planning, adjusting, modifying, dreaming. Perspective matters, but experience matters too (there are some kids' ideas that are encouraged by parental experience, and some kids' ideas that are vetoed because of parental experience.) It's fair to say that parents want their children to grow up successful. But what does success look like?

Perspective means that success can look different over time. Many parents measure success by wanting their kids to have a high paying job, buy a house, and invest heavily in their 20's. That said, factually you are more likely to have less responsibility in your 20's so changing jobs, or moving locations, or prioritizing travel has fewer life consequences because you are the only one depending on you. Fewer consequences, but a lot of valuable experience. To further that point, the reality is that there are some things such as staying in a hostel while you travel that are normal in your 20's but kind of creepy in your 30's and beyond, especially with kids.

As you thoughtfully work to grow the success and financial health of your family consider how you help set your kids up for success. Do they go to college or enter the workforce right away? How often and where do they volunteer? How much do you pay for college and for how much should they be financially responsible? How do you give them the ability to do hard things in a safe environment while they are younger so they

free for education related expenses. **Pro-tip** - if the grandparents open the 529 it won't show up on the FAFSA until 2 years after the first distributions are made. Eyes wide open, if you do this understand that the grandparents control it ...so make sure you like that idea.

Trump Account - ideal for retirement planning. Short details: This is a brand-new type of account as of July 2026 and is available only for people under age 18. You can invest up to \$5,000 per year in this account. It acts mostly like an IRA and goes to the child's control at their age 18. Any money pulled out before age 59.5 will be taxed and have a penalty. **Bonus:** Children born in 2025-2028 will get a \$1,000 contribution from the government to their account. **Pro-tip:** At age 18 convert this to a ROTH for potentially massive retirement tax efficiency. (Talk with your advisor and tax person first.)

Brokerage account - ideal for the child who is not going to college. Regardless of age, you can invest any amount and withdraw any amount without penalty (taxes are still part of the equation). This would be ideal for building for a 20's travel fund, or a house down payment, or seed money to start a business. Remember this is not a checking account so it will go up and down with whatever it's invested in. **Pro-tip:** Use the help of a wealth advisor to help you choose what to invest in for long term goals versus short term goals.

Perspective is important, and so is using the best tools. The key to success is doing both well at the same time. ■

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Perspective matters

can understand how money works? How do you teach and demonstrate ... perspective?

Consider these three tools but be sure to consult your financial advisor about which of these (or others) fit your specific circumstances best.

529 Account - ideal for college funding. Short details: Money goes in after tax, grows tax free and comes out tax

Building care around women

Evertide Pelvic Health founder Katrina Sudduth turns personal experience into a Poulsbo practice focused on specialized care for women at every stage of life.

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

For Katrina Sudduth, pelvic floor physical therapy was once something she needed herself. Now, it's the focus of the new Poulsbo practice she built after seeing firsthand how specialized care could change a woman's experience of pregnancy and recovery.

After the birth of her first child, Sudduth experienced postpartum issues and tearing. When she sought pelvic floor physical therapy, she saw a difference in her own recovery. By the time she was pregnant with her second child, she was working in pelvic health and decided to continue treatment throughout her pregnancy.

The results reinforced what she was learning professionally. Her first birth had involved tearing and a difficult recovery. With her second, she delivered a 9-pound, 3-ounce baby after 12 minutes of pushing — without tearing.

"I got to see firsthand the power of pelvic floor health," she said. "My recovery was so much better the second time around, which is almost more important when you have another kiddo to take care of too."

Photos Courtesy of Olya Blase





At Evertide Pelvic Health, Sudduth works with patients on a range of pelvic health concerns.

was really impactful, and the community was awesome."

After moving to Western Washington, however, continuing that work would have meant a long commute. Her own experiences with pelvic health, combined with her growing interest in women's health, gave her another option.

"Because of my experience in women's health, I was already really interested in it," she said. "So that was kind of a natural jump for me. I decided to just dive in, see if I liked it — and then I fell in love with it."

Opening a business wasn't originally part of the plan.

Once she and her family put down roots in the area, Sudduth began thinking about how she could build something of her own while contributing to her community. The idea became increasingly difficult to ignore.

"Once the idea is there, it's hard to push it down," she said. "The more ideas I got, the more it was like, 'Okay, I have to just do it,' because I love that creative control."

That control is an important part of what she hopes to build at Evertide. She wants the practice to be more than a place where women receive treatment.

"I wanted to create my own community that's not only women who want to stay active throughout all seasons of their life, but who also want to give back to the community and meet other women," she said. "That's my big goal with having my own practice and having control over all of that."

Addressing a Gap in Care

Sudduth sees Evertide as addressing a significant shortage in women's health care, particularly when it comes to pelvic health.

"Obviously the gap in women's healthcare and pelvic health is huge," she

Evertide Pelvic Health's Poulsbo office provides a dedicated space for women's pelvic health care.

said. "There's not enough of us."

The problem, she said, isn't simply the number of pelvic health providers. Pelvic floor problems can also be overlooked because symptoms don't always appear to originate in the pelvic region.

"Maybe it's not mentioned by another healthcare provider," she said. "Someone's not really thinking, 'Oh, this might be a pelvic floor dysfunction,' because maybe the symptoms aren't in the pelvic floor. They're in the back or there's nerve pain down the legs, and no one's tying it all together."

Sudduth also sees a need for greater coordination among the providers treating women.

The Evertide Pelvic Health space in Poulsbo is designed to provide a comfortable setting for specialized care.



That experience helped shape Sudduth's approach to women's health — and eventually gave her the confidence to leave the traditional health care setting and open Evertide Pelvic Health, an independent practice focused on women's pelvic health across the lifespan.

For Sudduth, the decision was about more than starting a business. She saw an opportunity to provide specialized care in a field where she believes there is a significant shortage of providers, while creating the kind of practice she wanted women in her community to have access to.

A New Direction

Sudduth didn't begin her physical therapy career in women's health. Her original interest was neuro rehabilitation, and she spent years working with patients recovering from brain and spinal cord injuries at a specialty hospital in Colorado.

"I actually wanted to work in neuro, and I ended up working in neuro for seven years," she said. "I worked in brain injury and spinal cord injury at a specialty hospital in Colorado. I loved that work. It

Feature

"There is a huge gap in collaboration over women's health," she said. "Maybe there's a PCP, a rheumatologist, a gyn and a PT on board, but no one's collaborating on a holistic plan of care for the client. They get kind of tossed around, and maybe it takes two years for them to finally see a pelvic floor PT and that's what fixes the thing they could have just gone to in the first place."

Running her own practice gives Sudduth more control over how she approaches treatment and how much time she can spend with patients.

"It's another reason why I have my own practice," she said. "I get to choose who I treat, how I treat, how long I treat people for. I'm not bound by all these other rules, and I can make sure they're getting the best care they can get."

More Than Kegels

One of Sudduth's goals is to help women better understand what pelvic health actually encompasses.

For many people, pelvic floor therapy is synonymous with Kegels and strengthening exercises. Sudduth says that's only part of the picture — and sometimes strengthening isn't what a patient needs at all.

"There's pelvic health therapy, and then there's pelvic health therapy," she said. "It's not just doing Kegels or exercises and strengthening your glutes and your core. We have to internally treat the tissues, just like we would anywhere else in the body."

In a lot of cases, the problem is excessive tension rather than weakness.

"A lot of the time it's a too-much-tension issue, and we need to work on relaxing," she said. "It's not actually a weakness issue, which blows people's minds when they hear that."

Sudduth recommends that women experiencing symptoms receive a thorough evaluation before deciding what treatment they need.



Katrina Sudduth works with women through every stage of life at Evertide Pelvic Health.

"I always tell people who are interested in pelvic health, just get an evaluation with someone who will do an internal assessment," she said. "You don't know which way you land until you get the assessment. You could be doing something that's detrimental and making your issues worse."

Her patients range from women in their early 20s to those in their 70s and 80s. They may be preparing for a first pregnancy, recovering from childbirth or dealing with changes associated with perimenopause and postmenopause.

She treats conditions including endometriosis and adenomyosis-related symptoms, back and SI joint pain, sciatica and other nerve pain, abdominal scar tissue, constipation, bladder problems, pain with intercourse and pregnancy- and postpartum-related concerns.

She also works with other specialists, including surgeons at Pacific Endometriosis Center in Gig Harbor.



Katrina Sudduth brings her experience in pelvic health to her new practice, Evertide Pelvic Health.

Hormonal changes are another area where Sudduth sees an important role for pelvic health care.

"With hormone changes, the tissues change too," she said. "We can't just rely on hormone therapy; we also have to change the tissues back to how they should be."

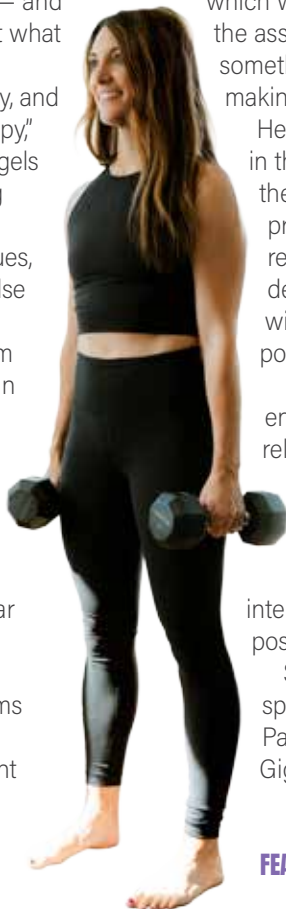
Preparing for Pregnancy and Beyond

Pregnancy care is a particular focus for Sudduth. She typically begins seeing pregnant patients around 12 weeks and continues through delivery when there are no high-risk complications.

Her work can include internal treatment, soft-tissue work and preparation for pushing in positions tailored to each patient's birth plan and delivery setting.

"I tell them what their body's doing and which position they're pushing their best in," she said. "I've been told by many first-time moms it's the most valuable information they received in pelvic floor therapy, because they feel really empowered in the delivery room."

The goal is preparation rather than a guarantee of a particular birth outcome.



"My big goal with pregnancy is to have a non-traumatic birth," she said. "We can't control everything, baby doesn't always cooperate, but we prepare for all scenarios. The less a mom has to focus on her own recovery postpartum, the more she can focus on her baby and her family."

Although Evertide has only recently opened, Sudduth said demand has already been "huge."

"We do need more healthcare providers in all areas, but especially in pelvic health," she said. "OB/GYNs are short in this area too. Everything feels short."

Building a Different Kind of Practice

Sudduth also wants Evertide to provide something that can be difficult to find in a traditional medical setting: a place where women feel comfortable discussing subjects that can be embarrassing or difficult to talk about.

"I want it to be a place where women come to talk about uncomfortable things," she said. "And then they go back out and spread the good word and tell other people about it."

For now, Sudduth is running Evertide largely on her own. She is the clinician as well as the scheduler, marketer and office manager.

"I don't have any admin support," she said. "I like wearing all the hats, but finding the time to wear all the hats is really hard. The texts, the phone calls, the emails, the marketing — it's a learning curve."

Finding an affordable space was another challenge.

"Finding a space was actually really hard," she said. "There's just not a lot that's affordable for small clinics and still a good space."

Despite those challenges, Sudduth says building the practice has been more rewarding than she expected.

"It's been even more fun than I thought it would be," she said. "There's something about coming to work every day knowing you're building something for your clients and for yourself and your family, rather than just working for a paycheck."

She expects there will be difficult periods as the business grows, but the early experience has reinforced her decision to take the leap into entrepreneurship.

"I think when you hear people talk about business, you assume it's all hard and there are so many ups and downs," she said. "I'm sure there are downs coming, but right now it feels like no one really warned me, 'Oh, this is going to feel really fun and really good and bring you even more energy.' It gets me up more in the morning to do my day."

Sudduth hopes Evertide will grow enough to bring additional providers onto the team while remaining focused on the Kitsap community.

"I want it to grow — to fill this whole space, to have a few more team members so we can help more people and get them in quicker," she said. "I want it to be a solid business that's well known in the community."

For Sudduth, success ultimately comes down to the difference Evertide makes for the women who walk through its doors — and the conversations they take with them when they leave.

"I want people to feel like, 'Hey, I'm going to send someone to Evertide Pelvic Health. If anything, they're going to get some education just talking to Katrina or whoever's on the team,'" she said. "If I can make that kind of impact on my community, that's what success looks like." ■



Details inside Evertide Pelvic Health in Poulsbo reflect Sudduth's focus on creating a comfortable environment for patients.



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Real Estate

Leading, Buying, Owning: Women and Real Estate in Kitsap County

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

Walk into most Kitsap brokerage offices and the roster skews female 64% of sales agents nationally, 68% of part-time agents, a majority that has held since women first outnumbered men in NAR membership back in 1978. But climb the ladder and the numbers invert. Broker-licensee representation drops to 59%. Executive and ownership roles thin out further, and in commercial real estate specifically, women make up just 36.7% of the workforce, with the pandemic years stalling what progress had been made. Kitsap is not exempt from that pattern. The county's downtown corridors Bremerton, Silverdale, Poulsbo, Port Orchard, Bainbridge Island, Kingston, Gig Harbor are full of women running the storefronts, staging the listings, and managing the transactions. Fewer of them hold the deed to the building.

That gap is worth naming precisely because the representation story in Kitsap real estate is already strong. Every closing here runs through a network women disproportionately lead brokers negotiating price and terms, lenders structuring financing, title and escrow professionals moving ownership securely, plus the stagers, designers, photographers, inspectors, marketers, and bookkeepers who get a listing market-ready and a small business off the ground. Home staging companies, interior design firms, marketing agencies, and senior-relocation specialists throughout the county are disproportionately women-



founded, and that work has a direct line to sale price and market time. This is not peripheral labor, it is the infrastructure the industry runs on.

It is also, increasingly, who is buying. Nationally, single women now account for roughly one in five homebuyers more than double the share of single men and for the first time, single female first-time buyers out-earn their male counterparts, with a median income of \$73,000 against \$66,400. Locally, that trend layers onto something Kitsap already knows well: a steady flow of military families rotating through Naval Base Kitsap, where the spouse managing the PCS move and signing the purchase agreement is disproportionately a woman making the decision solo while a partner deploys or transfers ahead. I see this directly in my own client base. These are not tentative buyers. NAR research shows single women consult professional advisors at higher rates than men, and 41% report real financial sacrifice, from cutting discretionary spending to picking up second jobs, specifically to close on a house.

The unanswered question is whether that same determination is converting into commercial ownership. Women buying the buildings their businesses operate out of, rather than leasing space someone else controls. A leased storefront is an expense that resets every renewal; an owned one is equity that compounds.

Kitsap's commercial stock is unusually approachable for a first-time owner-user, with storefront and small office buildings frequently trading in a range a profitable business can realistically finance, and SBA 504 programs exist specifically to narrow the down-payment gap for owner-occupants. That is a real on-ramp. Whether enough women-owned businesses here are using it is harder to measure than agent headcounts, and it deserves more attention than it gets.

Leadership is where this gets solved or does not. More women are stepping into brokerage ownership, team leadership, development, investing, and mentorship roles, and that matters in a field where success depends on relationships and reputation as much as capital. But barriers remain real access to financing, visibility in fields like construction and development, and the plain fact that mentorship has historically pointed women toward agent production rather than the broker-owner and investor track. Closing that requires lenders and brokers who walk women business owners through financing they may not know exists, and visibility seeing other women in this market who own the building, not just the listing.

Kitsap has the raw material: a workforce that's majority female, a buyer pool outperforming assumptions, and a commercial market still cheap enough to enter. Real estate here has never lacked for women doing the work, closing the deal, and building the business around it. The next chapter is making sure just as many of them end up holding the keys, not just showing the house. ■



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Feature

She played anyway

From a broken piano in a Massachusetts chicken barn to a Silverdale teaching studio, Christine Kastanopolous has built a life in music around persistence, problem-solving and second chances.

By Quinn Propst

Ward Media Staff Reporter



Photos Courtesy of Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

The first piano Christine Kastanopolous ever played was a giveaway — the kind of instrument a congregation hands off when it's past saving.

"If they gave you a piano, it's really past dead," she said.

Her father, a member of a Congregational church in Massachusetts, took the piano anyway and put it in the chicken barn. Kastanopolous was 6 years old.

Some keys worked. Some didn't.

So she figured out how to make the broken ones work.

She used Band-Aids and whatever else she could find until the entire keyboard played. It was never tuned.

"That never even crossed my brain," she said.

A book sat beside the piano. She couldn't read the title, but she could tell it was showing her how to play. She followed what she could and taught herself to read music.

The chickens became her first audience, lining up on the piano lid and bench. One



The intricate workings inside a piano reflect the complexity of the instrument Kastanopolous calls the "king of instruments."



Kastanopolous guides a student through a piano lesson, drawing on decades of experience as a music teacher.

She took to it quickly.

Before long, her band director told her she needed more instruction than the school could provide and sent her to Boston.

Beginning at age 13, Kastanopolous spent every Saturday at New England Conservatory from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., studying piano, French horn, theory and ensembles. She studied horn with the principal player of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and, through that connection, could cross the street to Symphony Hall and sit in on rehearsals.

Her audition remains vivid.

Playing in Jordan Hall, she forgot she was being judged. The acoustics were amazing.

"It was like the shower amplified," she said.

When she finished, nobody spoke.

She assumed she had done something wrong.

Instead, the orchestra conductor invited her to join his theory class, wind ensemble, brass ensemble and chamber orchestra.

The conservatory was demanding. Students faced jury exams every semester, and graduation required an hour-and-a-half memorized recital.

Three hundred students entered with her. Seventy-five graduated.

"I'm not afraid of dying and going to hell, because I've already been there," she said.

Kastanopolous knew, however, that she wanted to teach rather than simply perform. She transferred two blocks away to Boston Conservatory for its stronger education program.

Building a school around music

After graduation, Kastanopolous met her future husband — his dog chased her cat up a tree on Commonwealth Avenue — and the couple headed west.

In 1970, they flew to Calgary and traveled overland to Anchorage with matching backpacks and a black Lab

who carried her own matching pack. The journey took a month.

Alaska taught her another lesson in persistence — and humility.

On an early winter trip toward Talkeetna, Kastanopolous set out on foot carrying her gear. Within a third of a mile, she couldn't breathe or feel her hands.

It was 40 degrees below zero.

"Mother Nature is not your mother; she's somebody else's mother," she said. "If you're being stupid, you're going to pay the price."

Her Anchorage teaching studio grew quickly. But Kastanopolous wanted something more than half-hour lessons in isolation.

What had made the conservatory meaningful to her was the interaction between musicians — different players, instruments and sounds working together.

So she built a music school.

The preparatory school had 16 teachers whose credentials matched or exceeded those at the local university. It was designed for children rather than college students and offered musicals, ensembles, open-air concerts at malls and competitions her students routinely won.

There was one rule Kastanopolous considered particularly important.

"There was no blame and shame," she said.

Eventually, the demands of running the school became greater than what it could return financially. She closed it and returned to private teaching. A parent later bought the school and kept it operating for about two years. The experience gave Kastanopolous something that would stay with her: a clear idea of the kind of teacher she wanted to be.

Music could be demanding without being punitive.

Students could make mistakes without being made to feel like failures.

And learning could be about more than playing the right notes.

Another new beginning

Kastanopolous moved to Kitsap County in 2016, bringing her teaching experience with her.

preferred to sit on her head.

"Nobody ever knew where I was," she said. "But nobody really cared."

That changed when her father opened the barn door and heard what was happening inside.

He called a piano teacher, who told him she didn't take students under 10. He suggested Kastanopolous might be the exception. The teacher held firm.

So Kastanopolous kept teaching herself.

That instinct — to keep working at something until she figures it out — has shaped a career that has taken her from a Massachusetts chicken barn to New England Conservatory, from a music school in Alaska to a teaching studio in Silverdale.

It also shapes the way she teaches today.

Finding her way to music

In high school, Kastanopolous asked to join the band and was told she couldn't play piano in one. Instead, she was handed a French horn, an instrument she had never seen before.



Multiple keyboards allow students at Kastanopolous Piano Studio to practice playing together.

She bought property in Silverdale and eventually established her home and studio there.

Building the house presented its own challenges, including a long dispute with her first builder. Rather than give up, she found another path forward.

A conversation with workers across the street led her to builder Dave Wideman of Big Sky Enterprises, who completed the house in six months.

"He said, 'You're one tough cookie,'" she said. "I said, 'No — what is my choice?'"

The same question would become even more significant a few years later.

Losing the music — and finding a new way to teach it

About three years ago, Kastanopolous underwent her second total knee

replacement. She had warned her surgeon that anesthesia had become dangerous for her. She went under Dec. 2 and has no memory until Dec. 25.

After being sent home, she suffered a bilateral stroke the following Monday.

Her family was told she could die that evening, remain in a vegetative state or become totally paralyzed.

Instead, Kastanopolous began the painstaking process of rebuilding skills she had spent a lifetime developing.

She had to relearn speech, eating and the use of her hands.

Two months later, she sat down at her piano.

"I know what I want. I know how to do it," she said. "There was no connection from here to my hands."

Every piece she had learned was gone. But once again, Kastanopolous did what she

had always done. She started figuring it out.

What the stroke taught her about teaching

Someone gave Kastanopolous a book, *Learn Faster, Perform Better* by violist and neuroscientist Molly Gebrian, about why practice sometimes fails to stick.

The book helped her understand her own experience and rethink the way she taught her students.

The answer, she discovered, was often to slow down.

Number the measures. Work on one measure at a time. Use a metronome. Play slowly enough to get the passage right three times. Then move to another section.

The goal is to give the brain enough information to understand where a passage begins, where it goes and how the pieces fit together.

"I don't do slow," she said. "So I had to go, 'Hold on, horses.' If I can't do it, why do I think they can?"

Her approach is not simply about learning music. It is about learning how to solve problems.

With a 13-year-old working on a Bach invention after only a year of study, for example, the work might be less about the piece itself than about focus and control. When a student gets angry at a mistake, Kastanopolous stops them.

"If you're getting upset, you're just mad at yourself," she said. "Just dial it back. Find out what went wrong, and fix it."

Her analogies often come from another longtime passion: horseback riding.

When she taught in Alaska, she took students on an annual

trip to Homer that included tide pooling and horseback riding, along with a playing challenge students had to complete to earn a seat on the horse.

"If you sit on the horse and go, 'Go, horsey' — good luck, I'll see you at the end of the trail," she said.

The horse knows the moment a rider tightens their knees.

"So does the piano."

The best "Stuck on C" player she's ever met

One of Kastanopolous' favorite stories from her years as a teacher involves a class clown at his first recital.

He had Robert Vandall's "Stuck on C" cold.

Then he walked onto the stage and froze.

Kastanopolous stepped between him and the audience and made him look at her.

"I know your brain just went, 'No.' Don't worry about it," she told him.

Once she got him talking to her, the fear began to break.

Then she turned to the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to meet the best 'Stuck on C' player I have ever met."

He absolutely nailed the piece, she said.

Today, he is a professional performer working in the United Kingdom. Years later, he emailed Kastanopolous to tell her that he would have questioned himself forever if she hadn't intervened that day.

For Kastanopolous, the story captures something central to her approach to teaching.

"It's a lot of giving what I wish somebody gave me," she said.



Kastanopolous demonstrates a passage for a student at the piano in her home studio.

The next chapter

Kastanopolous Piano Studio operates out of her Silverdale home, where lessons are often supervised by Zoey, her small, treat-motivated and opinionated dog.

She teaches piano and keyboard and can teach any brass instrument, although piano remains her specialty.

She calls it the king of instruments because a pianist must understand every clef and the relationships between notes at the same time.

After decades of teaching, she knows that students don't all learn in the same way.

Some need more structure. Some need encouragement. Some need to slow down and isolate a problem. And some need a teacher who can help them get past the moment when frustration threatens to take over. Her own experience has made

that lesson particularly meaningful.

Kastanopolous had to relearn how to play after her stroke. She had to accept that some things might not return and then find new ways to approach the things that did.

She brings that same patience and persistence to her students.

The studio has room for new students, particularly teenagers and adults looking for individual piano instruction from an experienced teacher. More information about lessons can be found on her website sesamestreetmusicstudio.com.

For Kastanopolous, teaching remains less about perfection than progress.

And perhaps that's fitting for someone whose musical life began with a piano that was supposed to be beyond repair.

The keys didn't all work. She played anyway. ■



Kastanopolous keeps a sense of humor close at hand in her Silverdale studio.



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What I'm Really Building In Port Orchard

Locally rooted businesses – and the people willing to back them – help turn growth into community.

By Jennifer Wilson | Founder and Executive Pastry Chef, Wilson Patisserie

I have always believed a bakery should be more than a place to buy something sweet. At its best, it becomes part of a community's rhythm: morning coffee, a croissant shared with a child, a lunch meeting, a weekend ritual, and the familiar face behind the counter who knows what you love.

That belief is what led my husband, Alex, and me to build Wilson Patisserie.

From Markets to a Permanent Home

Wilson Patisserie grew through farmers markets, pop-ups, custom orders, and years of listening to the people who returned week after week. We learned that customers were not only looking for beautiful pastries. They wanted a place that combined craftsmanship with warmth—a bakery that felt special without feeling exclusive.

Our permanent home is now taking shape in McCormick Village in Port Orchard. The approximately 2,800-square-foot space will bring together a scratch bakery, café, coffeehouse, light breakfast and lunch, weekend brunch, and a carefully selected beer, wine, and cocktail program.

I lead the pastry side of the business, while my husband Alex brings more than 25 years of experience in restaurants, hotels, catering, and private-chef work. Together, we are creating something neither of us could build alone: a French-inspired pâtisserie grounded in the character and hospitality of the Pacific Northwest.

Why McCormick, and Why Now

McCormick is growing quickly, but growth alone does not create community. That

requires places where people can slow down, gather, and feel connected.

We saw an opportunity to become one of those places.

Our goal is not to imitate a bakery in Paris or transplant a Seattle concept into Port Orchard. It is to create a neighborhood institution that belongs to this community—one that serves an excellent baguette and a thoughtful lunch, welcomes families, remembers regulars, supports nearby businesses, and gives visitors another reason to explore this side of Puget Sound.

Kitsap has talented makers, entrepreneurs, growers, artists, and business owners. What it needs now is continued investment in the gathering places and locally rooted companies that make a growing region feel like home.

Building the Final Stretch

Opening a brick-and-mortar food business requires equal parts imagination, endurance, and capital. We have spent years developing our brand, refining our products, purchasing equipment, and navigating permitting and construction. Our landlord is making a substantial investment in the buildout, and we have invested deeply ourselves.

We are now raising the final \$50,000 needed for essential furnishings, equipment, serveware, opening inventory, and the remaining practical pieces required to open properly.

We are interested in meeting people who believe in locally rooted businesses and want to participate in Wilson Patisserie's next chapter. For the right

community-minded investor—or small group of investors—this is an opportunity to help complete a substantially funded project and support a business designed to serve Kitsap for years.

What We Hope to Create

I want Wilson Patisserie to become the place where neighbors meet, celebrations begin, and ordinary mornings feel a little more beautiful. I want young bakers to see that serious pastry work can thrive in Kitsap. I want our success to strengthen the local food culture and encourage other independent businesses to build here.

The future of Kitsap will not be shaped only by population growth or new construction. It will be shaped by the places people choose to return to—and by the local entrepreneurs and backers willing to create them.

We are proud to be building one of those places, and we welcome conversations with those who would like to help bring it to life. ■





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HMG

HMG LLC, a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned facilities support services company based in Poulsbo.

Locker 61

A vintage shop on Viking Avenue, offering curated secondhand finds for the Poulsbo community.

Stone Chapel of Poulsbo Mortuary

Providing funeral and mortuary services to Poulsbo families.

Bainbridge AI

Founded by Travis Johnston, they build practical AI automations and tools for small businesses — call answering, follow-ups, scheduling — so owners get time back without adding complexity.

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VISIT

Kitsap

How do we help visitors linger longer?



Tired of sharing the sidewalk in historic downtown Poulsbo? Get anxious seeing the long ferry line in Kingston? For those of us who live in Kitsap, summer can feel crowded (*yes, I know it'll be October when you read this but hang with me, ok*). The people who live here want to enjoy the sunshine and scenery, and so do our visitors.

It may feel like we have too many visitors during the summer (*we had over 697,008 trips from visitors coming from 50+ miles away between June 21 and August 29, btw*). You might be right. But it's more useful to look at tourism through a value lens instead of a volume lens, because many local businesses depend on strong summer activity to carry them through slower months.

In 2025, Kitsap welcomed more than 3.39 million visitors, including 1.3 million overnight visits, generating \$528.3 million

in direct tourism sales across lodging, dining, transportation, retail and recreation. In our region, visitors stay about three days and spend an average of \$1,104 per trip. And thanks in part to PSNS and surrounding military installations, 64% of our visitors return.

So the opportunity isn't simply attracting more people. It's helping the people already here stay longer, explore farther and spend more locally.

Here are a few ways businesses can help:

In October, sell the extension.

If someone comes for a fall festival, pumpkin patch, concert or weekend event, give them a reason to stay Sunday night or add Monday breakfast. Build "stay one more night" recommendations around fall color, waterfront walks, bookstores, bakeries and dinner.

In November, sell the quiet.

This is the month to promote cozy weekends, storm watching, museums, restaurants, trails and small-town escapes. If your business feels calmer in November, make that the benefit.

In December, sell the occasion.

Light displays, and family visits, and holiday events that already bring people here. Hotels and restaurants can package simple "before the event" and "after the event" ideas to turn a few hours into an overnight.

In January and February, sell the reset.

Think wellness weekends, date nights, food-focused getaways, bookstore stops, waterfront lodging and uncrowded trails. Did you know that Bainbridge Island offers a "Love Local" deal for residents living and employees working on the island? Ask what your business offers that feels better when Kitsap is quiet.

In March and April, sell the return of spring.

Promote gardens, wildlife, longer days, outdoor recreation and early-season events before summer crowds arrive.

The goal isn't simply more visitors. There's more value from each visit.

Turn the day trip into dinner → Turn dinner into an overnight. → Turn one town into two. → Turn summer visitors into winter visitors. → Turn a first visit into a return trip. **That's how we help visitors linger longer. ■**

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Member of the Quarter

The Greater Kitsap Chamber is honored to announce our Member of the Quarter: Honeybee Horticulture! Since 2023, Mariah Mendez and her team have created unique, elegant, and creative floral and charcuterie designs for occasions ranging from weddings and corporate events to Chamber: Off the Clock gatherings. We are excited to recognize Mariah and Honeybee Horticulture for their creativity, community involvement, and dedication to helping people connect through memorable experiences across Kitsap and beyond.

Fostering Business Connections Through Charcuterie

The Chamber regularly uses Honeybee Horticulture's services at our Chamber: Off the Clock after-hours

networking events. Mariah not only provides a selection of delicious, fresh food, but intentionally designs a spread for each Off the Clock location. These spreads serve as much more than refreshments. They become natural gathering points where attendees connect, start conversations, and build new business relationships.

Elevating Events Across Kitsap and Beyond

Honeybee Horticulture strives to create celebrations that feel effortless, intentional, and fully experienced. Through planning and coordination services, floral design & installations, and luxury charcuterie catering, they remove the stress of hiring multiple vendors and ensure there are no gaps in an event's vision. They proudly serve clients throughout Kitsap County and across the Puget Sound region.

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Intentionality is at the heart of Honeybee Horticulture's philosophy, whether that be crafting a charcuterie spread or a flower arrangement that reflects a specific individual, event, or venue. Mariah and her team excel at creating meaningful experiences that

reflect an event's unique identity. Whether you're planning a wedding, corporate event, or community celebration, Honeybee Horticulture brings creativity, intentionality, and professionalism to every detail. We are proud to recognize Mariah and her team as our Member of the Quarter and encourage you to check out their services! ■



Alysa Grimes, GKC Advocacy Committee Chair

The Greater Kitsap Chamber's Advocacy Committee works on behalf of local businesses to monitor, respond to, and shape the policies that affect how they operate, from local budget decisions to state and county regulations. The committee serves as a bridge between our member businesses and our representatives, carrying members' concerns to decision makers and, just as often,



bringing information back from those representatives to our members. This summer, we spent time on the former, visiting members throughout the County to gather feedback on issues keeping the business community up at night in an effort to inform our elected officials as well as help frame the Chamber's 2027 Legislative Priorities which will be published later this fall. Share your concerns and feedback in the survey below!

Your Business, Your Voice:

A Roundtable on Regulation and Capital

In September, the Chamber teamed up with Matchstick Lab to host Your Business, Your Voice at Vibe Coworks in Poulsbo. This roundtable discussion brought together Kitsap business owners and entrepreneurs to talk candidly about what's making it harder to run a business here.

The burdens of heavy regulation came up early and often, with attendees describing the challenge of navigating overlapping state, county, and city regulations that often send mixed signals or duplicate requirements. Rising rent and operating costs were another shared frustration, compounded by a tax landscape that many felt works against small businesses. For example, there are a range of B&O taxes that seem disconnected from a business's actual ability to pay, and there

are county personal property tax obligations that add up fast for equipment-heavy businesses. Minimum wage requirements also drew discussion, particularly their compounding effect alongside these other cost pressures.

A second major theme was access to capital. Business owners, whether just starting out or years into operation, described a real gap in available funding options to launch, sustain, or grow in Kitsap.

These conversations are exactly the kind of on-the-ground input that shapes the Advocacy Committee's work. Thanks to Matchstick Lab for co-hosting, and to everyone who showed up to share their experience. Look for these themes to inform the Chamber's advocacy work and legislative priorities. ■

Help Us Advocate for Your Business

The 2027 legislative session is creeping up on Kitsap County, and the GKC Advocacy Committee wants to know: what's keeping you up at night? Before lawmakers gavel in, help us identify the policies, proposals, and trends that pose the biggest threats to your business. Take our survey by scanning the QR code here.

Your responses will directly shape our legislative priorities, testimony, and conversations with elected officials this coming session. ■





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August Membership Luncheon – New Member Showcase

Our August Membership Luncheon was all about making connections. As part of the Greater Kitsap Chamber's annual New Member Showcase, new members were invited to display their businesses and introduce

themselves to fellow Chamber members. Attendees also had the opportunity to hear from a panel of networking pros who shared how Chamber involvement has helped them create meaningful relationships and opportunities for business growth. ■




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New and Renewal Memberships for August

We appreciate your support of the Chamber's Mission!

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The UPS Store Bainbridge

(2026)

The UPS Store Poulsbo

(2026)

The UPS Store Silverdale (2023)

Main Street

Cloverleaf Sports Bar & Grill

(2002)

Dana's Heating & Cooling Inc.

(2010)

Downtown Bremerton

Association (2018)

Oxford Suites (2007)

Parametrix (2002)

United Way of Kitsap County

(1978)

Business

Bremer Trust (1950)

Bremerton City Nursery(1995)

His Ohana Shave Ice and

Tokyo Arcade (2026)

Keller Williams Greater

360 - Tamara Bright (2026)

Kelsey Green

Communications (2026)

Kitsap RV (2022)

Mentor Company (1995)

Mobility for All (2026)

MultiCare Indigo Urgent

Care - Silverdale (2026)

Rotary Club of East Bremerton

(2021)

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



Chamber August Off the Clock

GKC was excited to partner with the Greater Kingston Community Chamber of Commerce and Ameriprise Financial Services - The Latitude 48 Group to host Chamber: Off the Clock on

Tuesday, August 18.

Partnership is at the heart of the Chamber's work, and it was especially rewarding to collaborate with our fellow chamber to bring together professionals from across Kitsap County for an evening of connection and conversation. ■

Hwy 420 Ribbon Cutting

On Saturday, August 29, Hwy 420 celebrated the grand reopening of its new building.

The event brought together community members for an afternoon of live entertainment, food, and celebration.

Since joining the Chamber in 2017, Hwy 420 has grown from a small trailer building to its new and much larger facility today.

The Chamber is happy to recognize this exciting milestone and celebrate their continued growth as a longtime member of our business community. ■



Feature

Giving people their presence back

Erickson Event Design turns behind-the-scenes planning into memorable gatherings, from milestone birthdays and family celebrations to weddings and intimate events across Kitsap County.

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter



For Loren Erickson, event planning is about much more than creating a beautiful setting.

Walk into the light-filled Bainbridge Island studio she shares with photographer Fiona Margo, and the tables, decorations and carefully chosen details might suggest otherwise. But Erickson says those visible elements are only part of what clients are paying for.

"People think, 'Oh, pretty decorations and tables and balloons, and it's just for the pictures,'" she said. "But the best events make everyone feel like they're seen and they belong, and everyone is at ease. To do that, there's so much work that happens in the background — a lot of it is invisible, happening behind the scenes for it to feel that way."

That behind-the-scenes work is at the heart of Erickson Event Design, the boutique planning business she launched in spring 2025.

Erickson brings experience

planning large corporate events, a network of local vendors and an understanding of how to make an event feel personal without requiring the host to manage every detail. Her business focuses not only on weddings but on the many other occasions people want to celebrate: milestone birthdays, showers, family gatherings, retirements and other moments that bring people together.

For Erickson, the opportunity was in helping people celebrate those occasions without having to spend the celebration working.

Finding an opportunity

The idea for Erickson Event Design developed gradually.

Erickson had planned her own wedding and her children's birthday parties, and friends and other parents began encouraging her to turn her organizational skills into a business. At the same time, she noticed a gap in the local market.

"There's so much focus and opportunity around weddings, but I feel that there are so many other wonderful milestones in life beyond the wedding," she said.

When she began planning some of those events herself, she found that it could be difficult to find professional help.

"When I was planning some of these things, it was hard to find someone with the capacity to help me, because weddings are just such a large production

Loren Erickson, owner of Erickson Event Design, helps clients bring their celebrations to life through event planning, design and coordination.

Photo courtesy of Fiona Margo Photography

and folks do have to dedicate their time to that," she said.

That left room for a planner who could help with everything from a child's birthday party to a family member's 80th birthday. The business initially grew through word of mouth. Her children's birthdays led to requests from other parents, followed by family events and other celebrations.

"I just started sort of having an unofficial portfolio," she said, "and then I put actual dedicated branding around it, and thought more about where I could fill in — because there are so many other wonderful planners in the community as well."

There was no single moment when Erickson knew it was time to launch.

"The timing is never going to feel perfect, but I finally thought, why not?" she said.

From corporate events to family milestones

Erickson's professional background gave her a foundation for the new business.

She spent much of her career in enterprise technology, producing large-scale corporate events including Dreamforce. Those events required coordinating executive experiences, industry audiences, client programs, vendors and countless logistical details.

That experience now informs how she approaches much smaller gatherings.

"Having come from a corporate event planning background, I was able to learn the ropes in a tech setting of managing all those things behind the scenes, and now I get to apply them to fun life moments," she said. One of the biggest differences is the personal connection.

"From a logistics standpoint, yes — you're not worrying about how you're going to fit 40,000 people into a conference center," she said. "But you get closer to the people you're working for, so there's a different type of emotional connection. I want a core memory formed, and in that way it feels a lot higher stakes."

That personal connection is also central to how Erickson describes the value of hiring an event planner.

An event at Kiana Lodge showcases the personalized décor and design elements of an Erickson Event Design celebration. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Noelle Photo

"The luxury of event planning is being able to give people their presence back," she said.

Selling time, not just design

Erickson's clients range roughly from their mid-20s to their 70s, with a clientele that is predominantly women.

Many know what they want their event to feel like but don't want to handle the logistics required to make it happen.

"Oftentimes it is: I want to gather, I want to have this special moment, but I do not want to be in the weeds of it," she said. "I have this high-level vision — can you bring it to life for me?"

Others come to her with a much more specific plan and primarily need help executing it.

Either way, Erickson sees the service as a way to take some of the work off the host.

"The invisible load is real, and if I can take some of that off of people's plates and let them intentionally celebrate and be present in the moment with their loved ones, that's so rewarding," she said.

That philosophy carries into how she works with clients on budgets.

Reconciling a client's vision with what they want to spend is, Erickson said, "always the toughest part."

Rather than trying to make every element equally elaborate, she works with clients to identify what matters most to them and concentrate the budget there.

For one recent first birthday, for example, family members were traveling from around the country, making photographs particularly important.

"So we focused on making sure there was a really nice backdrop with balloons and a photographer to make sure those family portraits could get captured," she said.

"It really is usually picking the top few things the client wants to focus in on, and



A first birthday celebration brings family and friends together for a milestone moment planned by Erickson. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Noelle Photo

then finding other areas where you don't have to put as much budget behind."

The approach begins with getting to know the client.

"It's really getting to know the person and what matters to them, what they want to feel, and building the event around that," she said. "People might leave different



Guests enjoy a colorful fruit bar at an event planned by Erickson Event Design. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Noelle Photo



equation. Erickson has learned which vendors are best suited to particular types of events and client needs. "Knowing which caterer is the one when you're doing a kid's birthday versus a larger-scale wedding, or if you have a lot of dietary restrictions — those might be different people I'm working with," she said.

"Same with photographers: some love doing the family little-kid moments, and others are dedicated to weddings."

Those relationships become even more important as events become larger or more complicated.

"That's when you're lucky to be able to lean into your vendor relationships, because they can own their pieces for the event," Erickson said. "When you have that trust built, it makes it easier to be more hands off."

Her knowledge of local vendors has also led to another part of the business: curated guides for people looking for local event resources.

After repeatedly seeing parents ask questions such as where to find a baker or which venue would work for a particular gathering, Erickson began compiling recommendations.

"Now you don't have to spend hours searching or asking ChatGPT," she said.

Creating space for smaller celebrations

Erickson's partnership with Margo is another example of how she is building

the business around what she sees as a local need.

Margo's Studio Margo provides a small, flexible setting, while Erickson brings the event planning and design expertise.

"She has this beautiful space, fantastic location, and I bring in the event expertise and planning," Erickson said.

The studio can accommodate about 25 people with vendors, offering an alternative to restaurants, recreation halls or larger event venues.

"Many of our gathering venues for smaller groups are a restaurant or a parks and rec hall, which are all great," Erickson said. "But sometimes for those really special milestone moments, you want something a little more elevated that doesn't need a full 150-person venue."

The indoor space also offers a practical advantage in the Pacific Northwest.

"We've gotten rain in August," Erickson said.

Holiday dinner bookings are already coming in, with Erickson handling the setup and teardown so clients can focus on their guests.

"We set it up, we tear down. They just get to enjoy being with their people," she said.

Erickson sees the interest in smaller gatherings as part of a broader change in how people think about celebrating.

"There is this new wave and trend of gathering more intimately," she said. "If anything, maybe this stems from COVID and people realizing that belonging and community are really important."

Her events also take place in private homes and at venues such as Kiana Lodge, depending on the occasion and number of guests.

The process is designed to be consistent: an initial conversation about logistics, guest count and timing; an inspiration mood board; refinement with the client; vendor sourcing; and, finally, setup, on-site management and teardown.

Erickson also maintains her own inventory of rental pieces, allowing her to bring distinctive elements into events without starting from scratch each time.

events with the same type of feeling, but how you got there will be different based on the individual."

Building the business behind the scenes

For an event planner, relationships with vendors are essential.

"Oh, they're everything," Erickson said.

Her network includes caterers, photographers, bakers, rental companies and other event professionals. But knowing vendors is only part of the

Feature

Looking ahead

Erickson wants to continue growing the company throughout Kitsap County while maintaining the personal approach that shaped its beginnings.

"I'd love to grow into an event brand that's seen as a go-to resource for gathering in Kitsap County — whether that be an intimate event or a larger-scale wedding — and being a collaborator and bringing the community together," she said.

The local connection matters to her. Erickson grew up in the area, and building a business here gives her an opportunity to contribute to the community that helped shape her.

"To be able to give back positively to a place that made me who I am feels good," she said.

Ultimately, though, Erickson's message is simple: people don't need a major milestone to justify getting together.

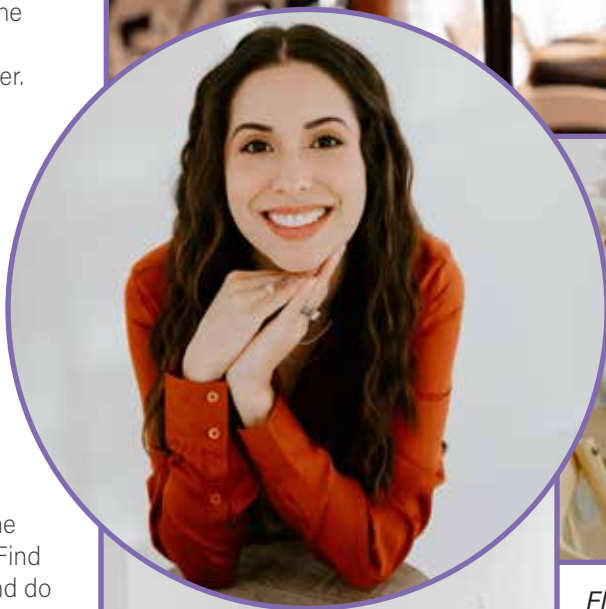
"You don't need a huge excuse to gather," she said. "Don't wait for the big anniversary or the big birthday. Find a random Saturday in September and do a golden hour dinner with your closest friends and family, and make that special. The little ones are worth just as much." ■



Young guests gather around the table during a celebration planned by Erickson Event Design. **Photo courtesy of Alexandra Noelle Photo**



Table details add a personalized touch to an event at Kiana Lodge planned by Erickson Event Design. **Photo courtesy of Alexandra Noelle Photo**



Guests gather at Studio Margo during an event planned by Erickson Event Design. **Photo courtesy of Fiona Margo Photography**



Floral details adorn a table at Studio Margo on Bainbridge Island, a small gathering space used for events planned by Loren Erickson. **Photo courtesy of Fiona Margo Photography**



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Recruitment

The Hiring Sweet Spot Between a Pulse and a Unicorn

By Monica Blackwood President & CEO West Sound Workforce

Hiring managers often feel pulled between two pressures: move quickly or hold out for the perfect candidate. Neither extreme usually ends well.

Consider this scenario. The candidate pool is limited, but someone comes along who meets 85 percent of the organization's needs. The interview goes well. The candidate appears capable, interested and aligned with the team. Yet the employer says, "It was great talking with you. We have a few other people to meet, and we'll be in touch."

Sometimes that is part of a thoughtful process. Other times, the employer wants to keep looking just in case a perfect candidate appears. Meanwhile, that strong candidate remains on the market. Another employer may recognize what they bring and make an offer. Two weeks turn into four, then eight, and the original position is still open. The elusive unicorn never arrives.

The opposite situation can be just as costly. An employer is so uncomfortable having a position open that filling the chair becomes the goal. Warning signs are explained away. Gaps in skills or experience are minimized. Questions about whether the person will thrive in the organization are brushed aside. The employer hires through rose-colored glasses and hopes everything will work itself out.

That is not strategic speed. It is panic wearing a recruiting hat.

So where is the balance? There is no universal number of days that works for every company or position. Each organization must decide how much time and flexibility a search requires. A better

starting point is to change how hiring success is measured.

Time-to-fill can be useful operational data, but it should not be the primary definition of success. A position filled in 10 days is not a win if the employee struggles, disrupts the team or leaves within three months. Employers should also consider how well the person performs, whether they stay, how they grow and whether they deliver the results the role was created to achieve.

SHRM recently described this shift as "precision over scale," focusing recruiting efforts on finding talent suited to the organization's needs instead of simply increasing speed, activity or applicant volume.

Precision starts before the job is posted. Hiring managers and recruiters need to agree on the position's true must-have qualifications. What must the person know on day one? What can be learned within a reasonable period? Which competencies directly affect performance, safety, service or business results? Which qualifications are simply preferences because a previous employee happened to possess them?

That conversation requires honesty. An unrealistic wish list narrows the candidate pool before recruiting begins. It can also cause employers to reject strong people who bring transferable skills, sound judgment and the ability to learn. A candidate who meets 85 percent of the requirements may be highly successful if the remaining 15 percent can be developed. A candidate who looks perfect

on paper may still lack the interpersonal skills or judgment the role requires.

When decision-makers say, "They are almost perfect, but let's keep looking," the hiring team should identify the specific concern. Is the person truly not a fit? Are expectations for someone entering the position unrealistic? Have leaders failed to agree on what the organization needs? Or is the role itself no longer designed around the work that needs to be done?

Extending the search without answering those questions rarely creates clarity. It does increase the chance of losing a qualified candidate. As I have written before, a hiring process that moves at a sloth's pace risks losing talented people. Strong candidates are not products waiting patiently on a shelf.

Employers should also look inside the organization before assuming every opening requires an external search. An existing employee may be ready for additional responsibility, especially when the move offers meaningful professional growth. The organization can then recruit for the more junior role, which may attract a larger pool of qualified candidates.

Effective hiring is neither a race nor a quest for perfection. It is a disciplined decision based on clearly defined needs, relevant evidence and realistic expectations. The goal is to know what good looks like, recognize it when it appears and move forward before a strong candidate becomes someone else's great hire. ■



Monica Blackwood is the President and CEO of West Sound Workforce, a locally owned staffing firm serving employers and job seekers throughout the Puget Sound region. West Sound Workforce provides temporary, temp-to-hire, and direct-hire staffing services with a focus on alignment, performance, and long-term success.

Q & A

Executive

Meet Anna Bressi,

Managing Partner
at Restaurant Lola

Anna Bressi, managing partner of Restaurant Lola, has helped shape the restaurant's vision and growth since opening in Bremerton.

Photos Courtesy of Olya Blase

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

When Anna Bressi and her fiancé, executive chef and co-owner John Hall, opened Restaurant Lola in Bremerton, they wanted to create the kind of neighborhood restaurant they wished they had in their own community. Today, Lola has become a destination for diners from throughout Kitsap and the surrounding region, with a loyal base of returning customers. As Lola's managing partner, Bressi oversees the business side of the restaurant while working alongside Hall to shape its direction and growth. From building a dedicated team to developing pop-ups, catering and special events, she has embraced the opportunity to continually evolve the business while staying focused on hospitality and creating a welcoming experience.

In this month's Executive Q&A, Bressi discusses building an independent

restaurant in Bremerton, creating a workplace where employees can grow, responding to changing customer preferences and the opportunities she sees for the city's business and dining community.

What made you decide to open Restaurant Lola in Bremerton, and what did you see in the city that made you believe the restaurant could succeed here?

Restaurant Lola came to Bremerton almost by happenstance.

We had spent about nine months developing a project in Port Townsend and finally reached the point of reviewing plans with the city. It was in a historic building, and the only viable route for a hood involved going up several stories. Suddenly we were looking at several

hundred thousand dollars in infrastructure before we had even really begun. I was four months pregnant with our son, Luka, I had recently been laid off, and John was remotely managing a small group of pizza restaurants he owned in Alabama. The project just stopped making sense.

We were pretty dejected. But I had bought a small house in Bremerton, my hometown, the year before, and we were constantly complaining about the limited number of places around us where we actually wanted to eat. At the same time, the pop-ups we were doing around the Sound were drawing a surprising amount of interest from Kitsap and North Pierce County.

So we thought: what the hell, let's see what's here.

I posted in Kitsap County Dining on Facebook—love it or hate it—and essentially said, "If you own a restaurant

Executive Q & A

and want to offload an operating concept, call me." About 30 restaurant owners responded, which probably should have terrified me. Instead, we saw opportunity. We toured around eight spaces and ultimately took over a fast-casual restaurant called The Salad Shack from a woman named Lanette in the Sheridan Village/Manette area.

So Lola was really the intersection of timing, demonstrated consumer interest and a very personal desire to build the kind of neighborhood restaurant we wanted for our own friends and family.

Opening an independent restaurant is a significant financial and personal risk. What gave you the confidence to make that bet, and were there moments when you questioned it?

This probably isn't the romantic answer, but: money.

We were able to open Lola without taking on debt. I've spent much of my career in high-pressure corporate tech roles, living below my means and saving pretty aggressively. I knew enough about restaurant economics to understand that a 20-seat restaurant was unlikely to make us rich. I needed to know that if it struggled (or failed) we could absorb the financial risk without destroying our family financially. I'm never going to be the

girl who takes out a second mortgage to make it.

The personal risk was much harder.

We opened Lola three months after I gave birth to our first and only child. John had to be deeply involved in the restaurant day-to-day, which meant I spent a significant portion of my first year of motherhood carrying the home and parenting side largely on my own while also maintaining my corporate career.

There were absolutely moments when I questioned whether it was worth it. There still are. Entrepreneurship gets talked about as this brave, exciting thing, but most of the real sacrifice is incredibly unglamorous. It's time with your family. It's sleep. It's attention. It's being the person who carries the risk when everyone else gets to go home. I still maintain a 50+ hour per week corporate career, now at Pinterest, alongside being an entrepreneur and mother.

In short, financial discipline gave us the ability to make the bet. The harder lesson has been understanding what you're willing to sacrifice personally to keep making it.

When you opened Lola, what did you want it to contribute to Bremerton and the broader Kitsap dining scene?

More than anything, we wanted Lola to be a place where people felt a sense of

belonging. We were labeled "fine dining" pretty early, but that was never really the goal. Lola should feel like your rich auntie's house: warm, cozy, generous, a little bit nicer than home, but never intimidating.

We also wanted people here to have access to exceptional ingredients without feeling like they had to go to Seattle to find them. From the beginning, we've tried to build around the Western Washington food system as much as possible—local farms, local producers and the incredible ingredients already available in this region.

I think the best neighborhood restaurants give a community both familiarity and aspiration. You should feel comfortable walking in, but you should also be able to experience something you might not make for yourself at home.

How has the business evolved from your original vision, and what have you learned that you didn't anticipate when you opened?

It has evolved in ways we couldn't possibly have predicted.

One of the biggest is that Lola became categorized as "fine dining," which was never really our intention. And instead of fighting the market on that forever, we're going to respond to what it's telling us. Early next year, we plan to evolve the physical restaurant into a much more value-oriented concept—more accessible pricing, more generous portions and something people can realistically work back into their regular dining routine.

That's probably the biggest thing ownership has taught me: you cannot become emotionally attached to the original version of your business.

We've also had to respond to regulatory realities we didn't anticipate. Losing our private dining room, for example, materially changed part of our business model.

Then there are the surprises you're happy to have. Our pop-up programs became far more popular than we expected. Our 4/20 dinner is one of our busiest nights of the year, and it started almost as a joke. We've also developed an extraordinarily loyal base of regulars. If you had told me when we opened that,



The dining room at Restaurant Lola in Bremerton.



Restaurant Lola's menu changes as Bressi and Hall continue to evolve the restaurant's offerings.



Bressi has helped build Restaurant Lola into a destination for diners from throughout the region.

in some months, roughly 60% of the people walking through the door would be returning guests we recognize, I would never have believed you.

Organizationally, we originally imagined having more middle management. In a restaurant this small, that structure just hasn't made sense. It means John and I have remained much more operationally involved than we expected.

And one of my favorite evolutions has been our partnership with Manette Flower Co. I admired her work before Lola existed, and bringing her into the restaurant shortly after opening became an important part of the identity of the space. She gives Lola its sparkle.

Your original business plan is a hypothesis. Eventually the market tells you what the business actually needs to become. You just have to be willing to listen.

What are some of the biggest challenges facing independent restaurants today that customers may never see from the dining room?

Costs, consumer price sensitivity and staffing—and all three are colliding at the same time.

Our utility costs are roughly 200% of what they were last year. Interestingly, because we buy so much locally, our local food costs have remained relatively stable. But imported products, alcohol and many of the other inputs required to operate have increased significantly.

Being on the peninsula adds another layer. We simply don't have the same depth of purveyors and distributors you have in Seattle, so there's less competition and less flexibility when costs rise.

At the exact same time, customer behavior has changed dramatically. We're serving more than 100 fewer guests per month than we were previously. What's interesting is that the guests who do come are often spending more when they're here. That data tells me something important: dining out has shifted from a routine to a splurge.

Two years ago, Lola might have been somebody's weekly date night. Now that same couple may come once a month or once a quarter, but when they do, they order the bottle of wine, dessert and the extra course. They're still willing to spend - they're just spending much less frequently.

And then there's labor. Hospitality is hard work, and fewer people are choosing it as a career. No one at Lola makes minimum wage—no one ever has—and our team receives paid time off. But we also ask a lot of them. Our front-of-house staff needs wine knowledge, food knowledge and bartending ability. Our back of house is making sauces as complex as they'd be making in a Michelin star restaurant in New York because that's John's background. In a smaller labor market, there are a lot of restaurants competing for a relatively small pool of experienced people. We actually share several employees with other restaurants.

The dining room can feel effortless on a Saturday night. The economics behind making it feel effortless are anything but.

How do you approach pricing when food and labor costs are rising but customers are also increasingly sensitive to what they pay?

You have to protect value. There's really no way around it.

There are dishes people associate with Lola - our collard green ravioli with oxtail, scallops over wild rice, handmade apple tarts - that I love and guests love, but that simply don't make economic sense on the menu at their current cost.

So we make choices.

We've reduced parts of our pasta program. We've invested in equipment that reduces labor. We constantly audit prep, purchasing, menu mix and execution to understand where we can take cost out without taking hospitality out.

We've also introduced dishes like steak frites that are relatively straightforward to execute, have a cost structure we can sustain and still feel generous to the guest. And customers love them.

The answer cannot always be, "Raise the price." At some point you've exceeded what your market can—or wants to—support. Good operating means designing a product people are excited to buy at a price that still allows you to be there next year.

John Hall, executive chef and co-owner of Restaurant Lola, works alongside managing partner Anna Bressi.



Executive Q & A

Flowers from Manette Flower Co. add color and character to Restaurant Lola's dining room.



John Hall, executive chef and co-owner of Restaurant Lola, leads the restaurant's kitchen.

Restaurant Lola's dining room offers an intimate setting for guests.



Anna Bressi brings her experience in business and hospitality to her role as managing partner of Restaurant Lola.

What have you learned about margins, profitability and the economics of running a restaurant since becoming an owner?

What margins? lol

But really, the biggest thing I've learned is that you cannot mistake revenue for health, and you cannot look at one metric in isolation.

Right now, for example, our utilities are roughly 200% of what they were last year and we're serving more than 100 fewer guests per month. At the same time, average spend among the guests who are coming has increased.

If I only looked at average check, I might say, "Great, people are spending more." But that would completely miss the larger behavioral change: Lola has moved from being a weekly or monthly habit for many people to being an irregular splurge.

That changes the economics of the entire business.

It means you have to rethink menu mix, labor, hours, programming, purchasing—even what the concept itself should be.

Almost nothing in a restaurant can be "set and forget." Profitability isn't one brilliant decision. It's hundreds of relatively unglamorous decisions made repeatedly and with discipline.

And sometimes the most important financial decision is recognizing that the market has changed before your P&L forces you to admit it.

What have you learned about recruiting and retaining good employees in Kitsap County? What does it take to build a team people want to stay with?

I think employers sometimes make this more complicated than it needs to be. You have to treat people like human beings.

Pay people as much as the business can responsibly afford. Give them paid time off so they can actually rest. Remember that we're not curing cancer - we're serving dinner. The work matters, but no plate of food is worth treating someone poorly. I've never met a chef or operator talented enough for me to look beyond how they treat their staff (and I've met some really

talented folks). And give people room to grow.

Most of our employees had never worked in a Lola-style restaurant before joining us. Our kitchen manager had never worked in a restaurant at all, and he's second in command below John and I as owners. Someone has to be willing to give talented people their first real opportunity.

That also means accepting that people will make mistakes. If you want to develop talent rather than simply buy talent (which isn't around to buy in our county even if you wanted to), you have to coach diligently, set clear expectations and allow people to fail safely enough that they can learn.

There is enormous talent in your own community. Sometimes leadership is simply being willing to see it before someone else does.

What kind of workplace culture are you intentionally trying to create at Lola, and how does that translate into the experience customers have?

I want Lola to feel welcoming, curious and transparent - for the people who work there and the people who dine there.

Internally, we try to explain the "why." Why is this ingredient from this producer? Why did we change this process? Why did I make this business decision? No one is above being questioned, including John and me.

We also talk a lot about entry points.

For employees, that might mean staging or picking up shifts before joining the team permanently. They get an opportunity to understand us, and we get an opportunity to understand them.

For customers, entry points might be steak frites or pan-roasted chicken. Not everyone walks into Lola ready to order shrimp and grits, morel agnolotti or ratatouille. That's okay. Hospitality shouldn't be a test of whether you understand the menu.

The culture we want is: come in, get comfortable, ask questions and participate at whatever level makes sense for you.

What advantages does Bremerton offer an independent restaurant, and what barriers make doing business here more difficult?

The greatest advantage is the people.

Bremerton locals genuinely want independent businesses and interesting food to succeed here. This community has lifted Lola up again and again, and I don't take that for granted.

And this may sound random, but Kitsap Public Health is phenomenal.



Restaurant Lola managing partner Anna Bressi with her fiancé, executive chef and co-owner John Hall, and their son, Luka.

We've catered around the country and previously owned restaurants in Alabama, and our experience with the health department here has been world-class: communicative, professional and focused on helping operators understand how to do things correctly. The challenge is how exposed Bremerton is to changes in

federal employment and the shipyard.

During the February-through-April government shutdown, there were days when our sales were 50% below baseline and some periods when they were down closer to 80%. For a 20-seat independent restaurant, that isn't a soft quarter. That's an existential crisis. And the part people sometimes miss is that consumer behavior doesn't automatically snap back when the immediate crisis ends. People remember being afraid that they couldn't make their mortgage or car payment. They rebuild savings. They pull back on discretionary spending.

We're still feeling some of that behavior.

That dependence creates real volatility for local businesses. Economic diversification isn't an abstract policy issue for a restaurant owner in Bremerton.

We can see it in our covers almost immediately.

Lola has become a restaurant people will travel to. How important is drawing customers from outside Bremerton to the business, and was becoming a regional destination something you envisioned from the beginning?

At our current price point, it's critical.

On a typical day, only about half of our guests are actually from Bremerton. The rest are coming from elsewhere in Kitsap or from Pierce and King counties.

I don't think we opened Lola saying, "We're going to build a destination restaurant." We wanted to build a really good neighborhood restaurant. But when you operate something this small, the addressable market matters. You need enough people who value what you do and are willing to make the trip for it.

So becoming a regional draw wasn't necessarily the original strategy, but it has become an important part of the economics of the business. And I think there's something positive in that for

Executive Q & A

Bremerton. Every person who drives or ferries here for dinner has the potential to discover another business, another neighborhood or another reason to come back.

Tourism organizations increasingly promote dining as part of the Kitsap experience. What would need to happen for Kitsap to become known as a culinary destination rather than simply a place with some good restaurants?

We need a few more strong, cohesive corridors.

People love 11th Street in Manette because it feels like an ecosystem. You can go to Saboteur in the morning, have lunch at Boat Shed, dinner at Hound + Bottle, then drinks and a show at the Manette Saloon. Every business is distinct, but together they create a sense of place.

I'd love to see versions of that emerge on Callow, downtown and Sheridan.

People aren't only looking for somewhere to eat anymore. They're looking for a vibe. They want to park or get off the ferry and spend four or five hours somewhere. Food, retail, bars, entertainment and public space all reinforce one another.

And I actually think experience becomes even more important during periods of economic uncertainty. When people have less discretionary income, they become more intentional about where they spend it. "Dinner" may not be enough. A memorable afternoon or evening is a much stronger proposition.

Kitsap already has plenty of individual talent. The next step is density.

When you look at downtown Bremerton today, what do you think it needs most to become a stronger business district over the next five years?

First, I think the Downtown Bremerton Association is doing tremendous work, and we're huge fans of what Jessica and the team are building around Quincy Square. But downtown needs significantly more food and beverage businesses. Full

stop. It also needs more businesses open after 8 p.m.

There are still too many vacant storefronts. I would love to see the city aggressively reduce the risk for independent food and beverage operators to fill them—something similar to the kinds of activation programs Seattle used in Pioneer Square after COVID. Put out an RFP. Subsidize rent and utilities for a defined period. Give small operators enough runway to prove a concept.

Vacancy has a compounding effect, but so does activity. Three great, related businesses on a block make the fourth business more viable.

We don't need every storefront to become another version of something we already have. We need complementary uses. We have plenty of tattoo shops. We still don't have a real cocktail bar downtown.



Anna Bressi, managing partner of Restaurant Lola, oversees the business alongside her fiancé, executive chef and co-owner John Hall.

The goal should be density, variety and reasons to stay.

Five years from now, what would success look like for Restaurant Lola — not just financially, but in terms of what you've built?

I think the biggest mistake I could make would be defining success as keeping Restaurant Lola exactly the same.

I don't think it will be the same restaurant five years from now. Frankly, I don't think it should be.

What we're seeing in the market is pretty clear: people still want excellent food and meaningful experiences, but they have less room in their budgets for frequent high-check dining. So rather than spending the next five years trying to convince customers to behave the way they did two years ago, we're building around the way they actually live now.

The physical restaurant will move toward a much more value-focused model: larger portions, lower average checks, food you can come eat regularly instead of saving for an occasion.

At the same time, I think the Lola brand becomes more concentrated around the things where premium service still makes sense: catering, private dining, in-home experiences and special events. Those customers are intentionally purchasing an occasion, and we're very good at delivering that.

Beyond this iteration of Lola, I'd like us to build one or two additional concepts around that same principle of meeting people where they are financially. They should be distinctive, chef-driven and genuinely good - but value has to be part of the design brief, not something we try to engineer after opening.

To me, that is the company we're building. I'm much less interested in owning one precious restaurant forever than I am in building a hospitality business that knows how to listen to its market, create opportunities for its employees and continue putting great food in front of people at different price points.

The world is going to change whether I complain about it or not. I'd rather adapt. ■

Personal Development

Unleash Your Momentum: What Getting Tackled Taught Me About Life

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

I'm going to die.

That's what I said to myself as I was lying flat on my back, staring up at a blue sky littered with a few wispy, white clouds.

I'm going to die because I can't move any air.

Then I felt someone gently put a hand on my chest and say, in the calmest voice, "Just relax. Breathe in slowly." The voice was from the person who put me in this unenviable position.

It was fall 1979. I was a 9th grader at North Whidbey Junior High in Oak Harbor, WA. And it was early in the junior high football season.

I was with a group of teammates working on tackling drills. It was a simple concept: one line of guys was on offense carrying the ball, and the other line was on defense attempting to tackle.

I had the ball. My friend Eric Seelye was on defense. While I'd played Nerf football with Eric and other friends in the streets and parks by our homes, this was my first formal football experience. Eric was in the same grade but had played the previous year. He was both more experienced and a better athlete than me. I didn't know it when I took off running with the ball, but this wasn't going to end well.

In less than a couple of seconds, I knew the impact was coming. Rather than picking up speed to build momentum, I did the very last thing I should ever do. I came to almost a full stop and raised my chest up.

BAM!

Eric Seelye crushed me. His shoulder pads met my number 12 in the middle of my chest like a ton of bricks. That's when I found myself on my back gasping for air.

For any of you who've had the "wind knocked out of you," you can empathize

with that feeling. Eric was the first one there and, probably because it had happened to him sometime in the past, knew exactly how to handle it with me. Not bad for a 13-year-old kid!

That was the first of many instances when I realized I was more cut out for golf than football.

The error of my process was slowing down and standing up. In every sport I ever competed in, coaches preached that the best way to avoid injury was to always go full speed. You were less likely to be injured when you had momentum and energy.

The same is true for businesses, careers, and our lives.

Let's simplify by folding all three into one. While we might think we have two "lives," a professional and a personal, the truth is we really just have one life. I don't believe in the concept of "life balance," because our lives at any one moment in time are generally out of balance. Rather, my belief is that business and personal are *integrated* into one life.

I'm just past six decades of life, and I feel confident when I say there are seemingly many moments when it's easy to lack momentum and energy. We are all human. However, the key to our lives may very well lie in our ability to unleash momentum and energy when we need it most.

There are a lot of obstacles out there ready to hit us like Eric hit me on the

football field almost 50 years ago. Ever experience any of these in your life: the death of parents and other loved ones, relationship challenges, financial troubles, divorce, health concerns, loss of a job, or being turned down for a job or promotion? How about the mental strains that come with all of those and might also include impostor syndrome, poor self-talk, loss of confidence, anxiety, and/or depression?

All of those can and will make us stand straight up and get tackled, knock us on our backs, and take our breath away.

On that football field, I had a friend take care of me. Eric helped a teammate out that day, and we still see each other annually on the golf course and laugh about it.

Here are three ways to stay resilient so we don't allow our own life's momentum and energy to stay on the ground for very long:

First, use the power of the people in your life. Life is a team sport, and you have teammates who want the best for you and are ready to pick you up: family, friends, co-workers, and employees. Second, when things get hard, relax and breathe. One thing I've learned is that the challenge is rarely as bad as I first think it is, and the answer is simply finding a way to keep moving.

Third, believe in yourself. The first "sale" is always to yourself. When you have confidence, those around you will "buy" more stock in you. And that will help keep you moving.

While getting smacked down by Eric Seelye didn't do much for my football career, it did teach me a valuable lesson that I've kept for nearly half a century. Unleash your momentum and energy, and there's nothing that can stop you from scoring touchdowns in life. ■



Don't Miss These Signs of Multiple Sclerosis

Although there's no exact pattern of symptoms in MS, don't ignore these possible warning signs.

Karl Heward, MD | Neurology/Neuroimmunology, The Doctors Clinic, Cavalon Place

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic disease that is unpredictable and can be debilitating. It occurs when something triggers a person's immune system to attack the protective sheath that covers nerve fibers within the central nervous system, called the myelin. This interrupts communication signals to and from the brain, which can result in a variety of symptoms, ranging from numbness, pain and loss of mobility to memory problems, mood changes and fatigue.

"An autoimmune disorder of the central nervous system sounds scary, but treatment has come a long way. In the past this diagnosis of MS meant disability or being wheelchair bound within approximately 10 years. Now, we have a generation of patients who are relatively symptom free or have minimal symptoms, and they continue to walk, work, and live their lives. These treatments will continue to improve, and our ability to detect the disease earlier in its course will become increasingly precise," Dr. Karl Heward, MD, The Doctors Clinic Cavalon Place.

People of any age can develop MS, but onset of the disease most often occurs between ages 20 and 40. Symptoms of the disease can vary widely, so MS may look very different from one person to the next. A person's symptoms may also change over time. Differences in symptoms depend on what area of the central nervous system is affected and how severe damage is to the nerve fibers.

Because of this, there are not necessarily early signs of the disease.

Symptoms one person has may not be experienced by another. Or they may be experienced but not in the same order. Or they may occur once, never to occur again. There's no exact pattern of symptoms but any of the following symptoms may be a warning sign that you have MS:

- Numbness, tingling or weakness in your limbs that typically occurs on one side of your body
- Lack of coordination
- Loss of balance
- Unsteady gait
- Inability to walk
- Dizziness
- Stiffness, spasms or tremors
- Loss of vision, usually in one eye
- Blurry vision
- Pain during eye movements
- Vertigo
- Bowel and bladder function issues
- Fatigue
- Slurred speech
- Cognitive issues
- Mood swings
- Sexual problems

Many of these symptoms can also be attributed to other conditions, so just having these symptoms doesn't mean you have MS. In fact, there's a good chance you don't. But if you're concerned about

whether your symptoms are a sign of MS, talk to your doctor. He or she will listen to your symptoms, examine you and then may order some tests or refer you to a neurologist for further evaluation.

With MS, you may have only one of these symptoms at any given time or you may have multiple symptoms. The symptoms may come and go quickly or they may linger. Many people with MS experience periods of new or recurring symptoms, called relapses, followed by periods of remission when symptoms partially or completely improve.

This is referred to as relapsing remitting MS.

Periods of remission may last months or even years, but after each relapse, your body may find it harder to repair the damage caused by the relapse, which can make your disability worse over time.

That's why early treatment of MS is important – it helps to slow down the build-up of irreversible damage caused by relapses by reducing the number of relapses you experience.

Although there is no cure for MS, there are medications that help manage symptoms and stall progression of the disease. Seeing a neurologist if you have suspected symptoms of MS is one of the best things you can do because early diagnosis helps you better manage this disease. ■

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Firehouse Theatre owner, Terry Delegeane.

Just four blocks from the ferry terminal, the Firehouse Theatre offers a moviegoing experience that feels unmistakably Kingston: welcoming, unpretentious and full of hometown charm. Located inside a historic downtown firehouse, this two-screen cinema is the kind of place where going to the movies still feels like a special occasion. The theatre is owned and operated by Terry Delegeane, a former comic book editor and writer who had often dreamed of operating a small town movie theatre. Terry and his wife Donna bought a local farm six years ago, and when he caught wind of the Firehouse Theatre being put up for sale, he seized the opportunity to follow that dream. Over the past four years, Donna and Terry have both been encouraged and supported by the warm and appreciative Kingston community.

The Firehouse presents an eclectic mix of first-run favorites, independent and

foreign-language films, documentaries and beloved classics. Its 136-seat Main Stage offers the traditional theatre experience, while the intimate, 48-seat Backstage is perfect for a cozier night at the movies. The Main Stage even includes a soundproof "cry room," allowing families with young children to enjoy the show without worrying about every wiggle or whisper.

Thoughtful touches are part of what makes the Firehouse so beloved. Movie introductions lend an old-fashioned, personal feel, while audio-enhancing devices and open-caption screenings help make films more accessible. Both theatres can also be rented for private parties and special events.

Of course, no visit is complete without popcorn topped with real butter—best enjoyed alongside a beer, wine, hard cider or seltzer. With all-day \$9 tickets on Wednesdays, the Firehouse Theatre makes it easy to support local while enjoying the magic of the movies. ■

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Senior Wellness

Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Senior Living:

How Women Leaders are Shaping the Future of Eldercare



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

The senior living industry is undergoing a massive transformation. It is driven by shifting demographics, technological advancements, and evolving expectations of care. The senior living sector is forced to innovate rapidly. At the forefront of this evolution is a powerful force: women in business. While women have long made up the vast majority of the eldercare workforce, a shifting paradigm is finally seeing them ascend to the highest echelons of corporate leadership. Today, women executives, founders, and operators are not just participating in the senior living market—they are actively redefining it.

The Historic Workforce Disconnect

Historically, the senior housing and care industry has presented a stark paradox. On the ground level, women have always been the backbone of eldercare. According to industry labor statistics, women comprise roughly 80% to 85% of the frontline workforce in senior living, dominating roles in caregiving, nursing, dietary services, and life enrichment.

Yet, for decades, a familiar glass ceiling restricted this representation from reflecting at the top. The boardrooms and C-suites of major senior housing real estate investment trusts (REITs) and large-scale operating companies remained heavily male-dominated. This disconnect often created a gap between corporate strategy and the day-to-day realities of care.

Fortunately, the tide is turning. A new generation of female entrepreneurs and corporate leaders is breaking through, bringing vital perspective to an industry that directly serves a population that is

also predominantly female.

The Power of Empathetic Leadership

What makes women uniquely positioned to lead the future of senior living? The answer lies in a leadership style that blends sharp commercial acumen with high emotional intelligence.

Senior living is a unique business model; it is an intersection of hospitality, healthcare, real estate, and deeply personal emotional journeys. When a family chooses a senior living community for a loved one, they are rarely making a purely financial transaction. They are navigating grief, guilt, anxiety, and hope.

Female executives and operators are successfully leveraging empathetic leadership to build trust-centric brands. By focusing on holistic wellness, emotional safety, and community culture, these leaders are proving that human-centric is inherently good business. When staff members feel supported by a compassionate corporate culture, turnover rates drop, care quality improves, and high occupancy naturally follows.

Innovation Driven by Female Entrepreneurs

Women-led businesses in the eldercare space are also driving massive technological and operational innovation. Female founders are looking at old problems through a new lens, launching startups aimed at solving the industry's toughest challenges.

We are seeing women entrepreneurs develop cutting-edge solutions ranging from resident engagement platforms that combat senior isolation to AI-driven

workforce management software designed to alleviate caregiving burnout.

In the design and development sectors, female architects, and interior designers are reimagining the physical spaces of senior living – moving away from clinical, institutional layouts and toward vibrant, accessible, multi-generational communities that promote autonomy and dignity.

Furthermore, women in business are championing the shift toward preventative health and active longevity. Recognizing that the upcoming “baby boomer” generation demands lifestyle-oriented choices rather than traditional medicalized care, female leaders are pioneering boutique wellness concepts, memory care innovations, and sophisticated culinary programs that challenge the status quo.

Cultivating the Next Generation

As women continue to secure their places at the executive table, they are actively pulling up chairs for those behind them. Mentorship and advocacy networks focused on women in senior living have surged over past decade. These initiatives provide emerging female leaders with the professional development, financial literacy, and strategic networking needed to transition from community-level executive directors to regional and corporate executives.

By fostering internal talent pipelines, the senior living industry is beginning to bridge the historic leadership gap. This empowerment is critical for the industry's survival. With the global population aging at an unprecedented rate, senior living requires diverse, innovative thinkers to tackle future housing shortages and labor crises.

Moving Forward

As more female leaders take the helm, the narrative of senior living is shifting from one of aging decline to one of vibrant, purposeful living. Investing in women leaders is no longer just a matter of corporate social responsibility – it is the ultimate competitive advantage for the future of eldercare. ■

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Your Community Is Part of Your Marketing Strategy

By Amy Yaley | COO of Ward Media

When business owners think about marketing, they often think about advertising first. Digital ads. Social media. Print. Email. Google.

Those are all important pieces of a marketing strategy, but some of the most effective marketing a local business can do doesn't start with an ad.

It starts with showing up.

For a local business, your community is part of your marketing strategy. The relationships you build, the organizations you support and the events you participate in all shape how people see your business. And it matters because people don't just buy products and services. They choose businesses they recognize and trust.

You Don't Have to Write the Biggest Check

Businesses sometimes confuse community involvement with sponsorship dollars. They assume participating means spending thousands of dollars to put their logo on a banner.

It doesn't.

Sponsor a youth sports team. Donate to a nonprofit auction. Attend a chamber event. Volunteer your expertise. Partner with another local business.

The important part is to make it genuine. Choose organizations, events and causes that make sense for your business and your team. Then actually participate.

The visibility will come with it.

Community Creates Familiarity

We've talked a lot in this column about the importance of being remembered.

Community involvement is another way to build familiarity.

Someone may see your business at a local event. A few weeks later, they notice your ad in a local publication. Then they see one of your employees volunteering at a fundraiser.

None of those moments alone may result in a sale, but together they build recognition. When someone eventually needs the product or service you provide, your name is already familiar.

That's marketing momentum.

Tell the Story

One of the biggest missed opportunities I see is businesses doing great things in their communities and never talking about them.

We have to get better at telling our own stories.

Not every good deed needs a press release, but there is nothing wrong with telling people what your business cares about.

If your team volunteers, share the photos. If you sponsor an event, tell people why you chose to support it. If one of your employees serves on a nonprofit board, celebrate them.

Those stories tell people something about your company an advertisement alone can't. They show who you are.

Local Businesses Have an Advantage

Local businesses spend a lot of time trying to compete with larger companies, but community connection gives us an advantage.

A national company can buy advertising in our market. It can target the same

customers online. It can compete on price.

But it's much harder to replicate genuine local relationships.

We know the schools, nonprofits, events, businesses and people that make our community what it is. We can participate in ways a company looking at the market from hundreds or thousands of miles away simply can't.

Use that advantage.

Community and Advertising Work Together

Community involvement shouldn't replace advertising, and advertising shouldn't replace community involvement.

They work together. Advertising helps people recognize your name. Community involvement gives your name meaning.

When people see your business and see your investment in the place they call home, you're building

something much more valuable than an impression or a click. You're building a reputation.

The Bottom Line

The next time you sit down to plan your marketing, don't just ask where you're going to advertise.

Ask where you're going to show up. What organizations could you support? What events make sense for your business? What relationships could you strengthen?

You don't need to be everywhere, and you don't need the largest budget. You need to be present.

Because in a local market, being part of the community isn't separate from your marketing strategy.

It may be one of the most important parts of it. ■

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





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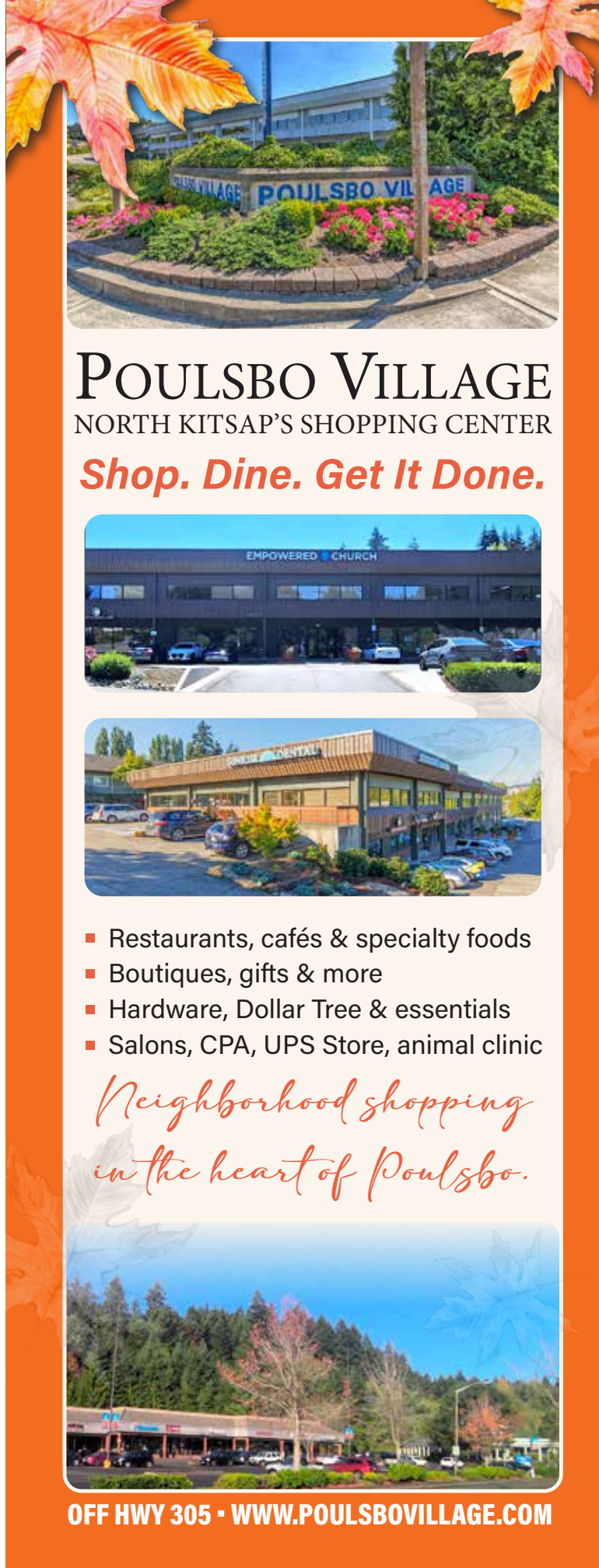
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The Hidden Cost of Leadership Clones: How Cohesion Without Challenge Costs Your Business

By Julie Piazza, SHRM-SCP, SPHR Anew Insights

We often think a strong leadership team looks like this: people who get along, share the same values, and think similarly about problems. They make decisions quickly. They rarely argue. Everyone walks out of the room aligned. It feels efficient. It feels like you're building something solid.

But here's the thing. That comfort can cost you.

When your leadership team thinks too much alike, you miss problems. You validate each other's assumptions without question. Red flags get overlooked because nobody in the room is waving them. Blind spots stay blind. Teams that think the same way tend to double down on flawed strategies, miss market shifts, and make hiring decisions they later regret. The echo chamber effect is real, and it affects your bottom line.

Research consistently shows that teams with varied backgrounds and thinking styles catch problems 40% more effectively than those that think alike. They consider more options. They push back on weak assumptions. They ask questions that haven't been asked. And they make better strategic decisions because of it.

So why doesn't every organization build leadership teams this way? Because sameness feels good. We naturally gravitate toward people like ourselves.

They're easy to work with and they validate our thinking. But easy isn't the same as smart, and comfortable isn't the same as competitive.

The cost of poor decisions is real. Failed initiatives waste time and money. Bad hires drain your team. Missed opportunities get seized by competitors. Regulatory oversights create legal headaches. Companies with varied leadership outperform on innovation, resilience, and financial results. This isn't just about doing the right thing.

It's about succeeding.

So how do you actually build a team that thinks differently?

Start by actively seeking varied perspectives when you're hiring or developing your leadership. This doesn't mean hiring just to fill checkboxes. It means genuinely

looking beyond resume similarities. Different industries, geographies, career paths, and problem-solving approaches all bring something to the table. Someone who spent their early career in tech has a different lens than someone who came up through manufacturing. Someone who managed operations at a nonprofit sees challenges differently than someone from corporate environments. Both perspectives make the team stronger.



Create psychological safety so people actually use those different perspectives. Your team needs permission to disagree. Understand the role dissent plays in decision-making and welcome it. Some organizations structure this intentionally, like building devil's advocate roles into key decisions or using structured debate processes. Others make it simpler by asking, "Who disagrees with this approach?" in meetings and actually listening to the answer.

Leadership that models it matters too. If you admit when you're wrong and thank people for pushing back, your team follows. If you get defensive about criticism, they stop offering it.

Here's where women in leadership fit naturally into this picture. Women bring different perspectives, experiences, and decision-making approaches to the table. Advancing women in leadership isn't about filling a quota or checking a box. It's about strengthening your team's ability to think through problems thoroughly. The same principle applies to any perspective or background that's underrepresented on your team. The point is this: when you bring different thinking into the room, decisions improve. This isn't a soft argument about inclusion. It's a solid business argument about performance and success.

Take a moment and audit your own leadership team. Do you have real diversity of thought, or are you surrounded by comfortable sameness? Are you welcoming dissent, or avoiding it? Can people in the room challenge you without political risk?

Here's a challenge: identify one person with a genuinely different perspective who could strengthen your team. What's stopping you from bringing them in? Is it habit? Comfort? Fear? Whatever it is, those reasons are costing you more than you probably realize.

The strongest leadership teams aren't the ones that always agree. They're the ones that think differently and work well together because of it, not in spite of it. That's the team that makes smarter decisions. That's the team that moves the business forward. ■

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Port Orchard veterans foster dog program earns national award

Partnership with Kitsap Humane Society has helped five senior dogs find permanent homes

PORT ORCHARD — A partnership between the Washington Veterans Home in Port Orchard and Kitsap Humane Society has received national recognition for a resident-run program that pairs veterans with senior shelter dogs awaiting adoption. The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs announced Sept. 8 that the Foster Dog Program received a 2026 Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Award, which recognizes state programs for service, innovation and measurable impact.

Launched in March 2024, the program allows residents of the Washington Veterans Home to operate a foster home for senior dogs from Kitsap Humane Society. Residents are trained and certified as humane society volunteers and handle responsibilities including walking, feeding and grooming the dogs, administering medications and coordinating adoption visits.

Five senior dogs have been placed in permanent homes through the program, according to WDVA.

The program also stands out for its operating model. It has no ongoing cost to the Veterans Home, relying instead on partnerships with community organizations to provide resources.

Kitsap Humane Society provides training, food and medical care for the foster dogs, while the Bremerton Base of United States Submarine Veterans



Washington Veterans Home residents, staff and community partners gather with a foster dog at the Port Orchard facility. The resident-run Foster Dog Program, a partnership with Kitsap Humane Society, provides temporary homes and care for senior shelter dogs while helping them find permanent homes. The program recently received a 2026 Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Award. Photo courtesy of Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs

Inc. helped fund kennels and other infrastructure needed to launch the program. Local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts also have supported the effort.

WDVA said the program has produced benefits beyond finding homes for older dogs. Veterans who previously participated in few activities have become involved with the foster program, and some have increased their participation in therapy services. The department reported improvements in mobility and engagement among participants as well as increased morale among residents and staff.

"This award celebrates the compassion and capability of our Veterans," WDVA Director David Puente Jr. said. "They continue to serve their community by giving senior dogs a second chance and, in return, finding renewed purpose and joy."

The partnership also addresses a challenge facing animal shelters: finding homes for older dogs.

"Our partnership with the Washington Veterans Home shows how community collaboration can change lives — both human and animal," the executive director of Kitsap Humane Society said in the announcement. "The residents' dedication has helped us place senior dogs who are often the hardest to rehome."

Resident volunteer Lou White said he initially had reservations about

the program but has come to enjoy participating.

"I had my doubts when the program was starting up, but have really enjoyed participating," White said. "It is always difficult to say goodbye when these dogs find their forever home."

The Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Award is presented by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in partnership with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs. It recognizes state-level programs demonstrating innovation and service to veterans and their families.

The 2026 honor is the ninth Pillars of Excellence Award received by the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs since 2014. Previous awards have recognized programs addressing veteran homelessness, suicide prevention, incarcerated veterans, student veterans, military spouses and the use of creative arts in veteran health care and transitional housing.

WDVA said the Port Orchard program could serve as a model for other veterans homes because it requires limited staff involvement and can be replicated through partnerships with local humane organizations.

For the Washington Veterans Home residents involved, however, the program's impact is more immediate: providing care and companionship to an older dog until a permanent home can be found. ■

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