



MIRAMICHI – A local hunting and salmon fishing lodge has recently expanded its business and doubled its available capacity, thanks to the opening of a second lodge as part of a partnership commitment with the Wallace McCain Institute, an entrepreneurial leadership business stemming from the University of New Brunswick.

Debbie and Dale Norton, owners of the Upper Oxbow lodge in Red Bank, were surprised with a ribbon-cutting ceremony last Friday afternoon and the presentation of a plaque. The plaque was in recognition of the three-year commitment the institute pledged to the Oxbow, signed by 50 entrepreneurs who have stayed on-site as part the program's requirements.

Nancy Mathis, founding executive director of UNB's Wallace McCain Institute, said although they have pledged to use the site for a minimum of three years, they are certain they will be staying much longer than that.

"It makes us feel like this is our home," she said of the warm welcome they felt when they first arrived to scout the location in November 2011.

It's clear that the relationship is already solid, as the McCain Institute has even been incorporated on the Oxbow's sign at the front of the drive.

The institute runs 18 different programs geared toward enhancing leadership skills for entrepreneurs and even those in new positions of leadership. Eleven of those groups are peer groups, where each of the members enrolled will visit the Oxbow.

At first glance, it may not seem a likely partnership, however, the needs of the leadership groups are specific and out of the 22 locations scouted by Mathis and executive in residence Paul Johnson, the Oxbow was the only one that would do, except there was only room for 10.

"It was great but it was too small," said Johnson recounting the day they first met the owners.

Debbie and Dale had always thought of building another lodge and when Debbie voiced her musings to Mathis and Johnson, they jumped at the idea and promised to be their anchor client if they built another 10-bedroom lodge, increasing capacity to 20 in total.

"We have to hold our meetings in a place with complete exclusivity. We can't have them in a Delta or a Hilton or The Rodd...We need a facility that can accommodate 20 and really not many more than that," said Mathis.

Groups like the Entrepreneurial Leadership Program (ELP), require the privacy the lodge provides to discuss confidential business matters and its natural beauty is the perfect environment to do some serious thinking.

After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the group went inside the new digs and popped champagne to toast the efforts of the Nortons.

"People say, 'You drive all the way up to the Miramichi once a month for this ELP thing?' And we say 'yeah but they don't get it' and I didn't get it until we got here," said president of Rupture Seal Glenn Cox as the room toasted Dale and Debbie.

The facility, overlooking the river, is equipped with wireless Internet, a boardroom and common space. There is no cellphone reception, however, which is a plus if you ask Mathis.

"We want them to be connected but not accessible," she said emphasizing the retreat aspect.

"You're a little bit off the beaten path here."

Those enrolled in ELP commit themselves to coming to the lodge two days per month for five years, after that period everyone in the group agrees to meet quarterly. The cost is \$20,000 to sign up and that comes along with serious time and travel commitments.

Mathis said she recognizes the intense commitment that includes, leaving home and family and the cost of travel expenses, especially for those coming in from out of province, yet their attendance rate is almost perfect she said at 99 per cent.

"When they get here it's so critical we have the perfect environment," said Mathis.

Members of the ELP groups have run businesses as small as being staffed by one all the way to 1,000 employees. Mathis said the average business size in the groups is approximately a staff of 50.

"These are not startups, these are businesses that have been going for five to 10 years and there's a new president taking over," said Mathis, who mentioned Gordie Lavoie, the new president of Sunny Corner Enterprises; and Hal Somers of Towne Ford, two Miramichi business owners who have gone through the program.

Debbie and Dale Norton live on site at the lodge, they have been owners since 1991 but the property has been in Debbie's family since 1823.

"We wanted somebody that's 150 years deep here. We plan to put down some serious roots," said Mathis.

And when they aren't around, which will be the majority of the time, the lodge will be available for other tourist and corporate retreats, the Nortons' main clientele.

"At the Oxbow, we're one big family; people come here hunting and fishing to be part of that family," Debbie said of her clientele this summer, who came despite the bad fishing season.

Previously, the lodge would have been closed for the winter, now because of the commitment from the McCain Institute, they will be open most of the year.

Debbie said her staff of six, which were previously seasonal workers during the summer months, are glad to have the extra work.

"It's like 100 per cent positive. They're ecstatic," said Debbie.

Generally their previous clientele was strictly for hunting and fishing, mostly American, some Europeans and a few Canadians. Now they will be focusing on corporate retreats during the winter.

"They mean everything to us, I mean they've doubled our business."