



## June 25, 2020 Transcript

*Henry and Linda Shaffer of The Inn at Narrows Creek are interviewed by PA Wilds Ambassador Josiah Jones from Visit Clearfield County.*

**Josiah:** All right. Well, this is Josiah Jones from Visit Clearfield County, serving as the PA Wilds ambassador for Wilds Are Working series. I'm here today with Linda and Henry Shaffer from the In at Narrows Creek. I just want to say welcome, Linda and Henry. We're glad to have you with us to share how you are pivoting your company amid these uncharted times. So thanks and welcome.

**Henry:** Thank you.

**Josiah:** Can you tell us a little bit about your company? You mentioned before we even came on screen, you know, you have a really good story to talk about how this all came about. I think everybody would love to hear the story.

**Henry:** Well, our intention never was to someday own a bed and breakfast. We used to see Bob Newhart when he had a bed and breakfast up and in New England. But we're not like that. So we're from this area originally. After college, we joined a Christian organization and spent about nine years all around the United States. And then we decided to move back to our area, mainly so our kids could grow up around here and their grandparents. So try to make a long story short, my primary employment at that time was as a residential contractor. I built houses, probably seven or eight houses a year in a recreational resort in Dubois' called Treasure Lake. It has residential homes and vacation homes and all the amenities that anybody would ever want. And it was a great life. But that pivoted a little bit whenever our family decided to go on a mission trip to Jamaica. And on that trip we visited a little remote village that kind of stole our heart. And we decided, the family, to see what we could do to adopt this little town to see if we could make a difference. And our desire was just to share the love of God with these people by helping them with whatever their greatest needs were. And so we started to get down as often as we could for a week or two at a time, and friends and relatives saw what we were doing, so they said, 'take us along.' So we started taking people with us. It ended up becoming a group, which ended up becoming groups. And suddenly ... we realized that we were spending about a third of our year traveling back and forth to Jamaica. Plus, we had a business that was running and something had to happen, had to give. One of the two had to be sacrificed. Our business, which was contracting, was how we made a living. Our mission in Jamaica was our passion. So, we decided that the business would be the one

that would be sacrificed. And so we still had to make a living. And so the idea came of starting a craft store because that was something that Linda was always interested in. But we didn't think that we would be able to survive in our area, in the strip mall or something like that, being away from home and all that kind of sacrifices that you would have to make to be an entrepreneur like that, that we could make a living doing that. So we were thinking about maybe a compatible business that can go along with that. So the idea came of a store and a bed and breakfast. And so actually, Linda didn't know anything about this at the time. I had found property. I had designed a property. And because building houses, we would move all the time. We'd move into a better house and build another and build a bigger house and a nicer house. Finally, Linda said no more. And so we found the ultimate living on the lake and a big, big colonial house. And she said, 'never ask me again.' So I had to have all the boxes checked because she was going to ask me a million questions and she said, 'yeah, sounds like a good idea.' So in 2000 or?

**Linda:** 1998.

**Henry:** 1998, we started building this bed and breakfast, which was designed after a 18th century New England inn. It took us a year to build it. And the day we opened up, we were cash positive, and we have been ever since.

**Josiah:** That's great.

**Henry:** And our outreach in Jamaica, which is huge now, we've taken about 25,000 people down over those years, and we've built over a thousand houses and given them to people down there and have a staff of about 100 people now.

**Josiah:** Wow.

**Henry:** Americans and Jamaicans. And so that's how we got into the bed and breakfast. And Linda can tell you more about that.

**Josiah:** Ok.

**Linda:** Well, it's like you said, it started in 1998 and started kind of slowly, but picked up fairly quick. We knew it was a good idea that we had the bed and breakfast because it probably was two thirds of the income at that point with a third with the store. It's now even closer, and so we can't give up either one. But about five years ago, we added an addition onto the saltbox house that we live in and moved downstairs. [We] hired my cleaning lady and her husband to live upstairs, and she basically runs the bed and breakfast, so I'm really spoiled. I run the store, I check people in and out, but she does everything else, the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning. And we are free to travel.

**Josiah:** Nice!

**Linda:** So that's the best part about this, because we're both in our early 70s. And it's time that we got to do a little more visiting with our children who almost all live in the south, two in Tampa and one in Atlanta.

**Josiah:** Excellent. Well, I tell you what, that's a great story. Thank you for sharing that. I have to say, it is a beautiful place. The inn is beautiful and so is the shop. And I would highly recommend anybody to go and check out both or one of those places. Again, thanks for sharing. Just to move on, how are you pivoting your operations amid this crisis? If I'm correct, I don't think you did shut down. Is that right, Linda, Henry?

**Linda:** No, we didn't. People were still traveling some; so we were still getting visitors at the bed and breakfast. One unique feature that we do have is that we serve breakfast in the rooms. They don't meet at a central dining room in our home. And it was a good choice for us in the beginning. We started it that way and it's proved to be the best choice. We don't waste time. We don't waste money. They get to be in their PJs if they want to. And they like it. And during this COVID situation, it's worked out even better. We would just take the tray to the door and hand it to them if they wanted us to, or take it and set it on the table for them. So the bed and breakfast and the country store, the slowest two months of the year for us are March and April. So it lined up pretty well, actually, with what we usually see. It was a little slower, but it wasn't bad. I mean, and the store was kind of a come as you are if you want to come, because people that are here usually are one or two at a time anyhow. It's not like we have a big crowd at once. And so I kept open mostly online and by appointment. I didn't keep my regular hours, opening it every day, Wednesday through Saturday, 10 to 5 until just, oh, probably two or three weeks ago when everything really opened up again. So it's almost almost back to normal. Now, I can't really say that, you know, it hurt us too bad. It slowed everything down. But it's a good time to reflect and everybody to get their act together, I think.

**Josiah:** Isn't that the truth. It really has given us a great opportunity to slow down and enjoy those things that really should be most important to us. I agree.

**Linda:** Right.

**Josiah:** Well, that's great to hear that, you know, everything kind of just went smooth for you. And that the downtime, it didn't hurt you. For everybody else, you know, in other pieces of the lodging industry, it's been a real struggle even for the tourism agency too. But I'm happy just to hear that everything went very well for you throughout this process. So how are you staying in touch with your customers? Are there different platforms you're using, social media or newsletters or anything like that that you use to stay in touch with customers?

**Linda:** We've always had a massive email list. We have just changed to MailChimp and we also are on Facebook a lot. There Stacy comes in again, my employee. She's the techie one; I'm not. And so we try to put something every week, here or there, on the store or the bed and breakfast, just post some pictures. During the time that I wasn't open full time, we did sell things on the Internet, too. I don't know that I want to get into that full time, but it's available. If somebody really needs us to mail something to them, we can show them pictures on the Internet. So, yeah, we have used it.

**Josiah:** That's good.

**Linda:** It's helped.

**Josiah:** Good. I know a lot of people have added online shopping and everything, and that's really helped out a lot of other businesses. That's good to hear. What operational pivots, approaches, will you continue to use as we move into recovery? I think you've already mentioned one; you'll probably continue the online shopping. But again, for the most part, you've kind of just kind of maintained and done the same thing. Is there anything else you might just continue that you just started?

**Linda:** I don't think so. I was trying to think of that before we hopped on with you, but I don't think so. I mean, through situations you learn different things, and you learn how to treat your customers better, how to serve their needs better and better. You know, we always had a good rapport with most of our customers, a lot of ours are return customers and that proves that point, especially with the bed and breakfast. We've had a couple that, actually he's here tonight, started coming here years and years ago when we first opened. They live in New York City. They came when they were first married, and then they came with a dog. And now they've come with children, and now they have a different dog. But he's coming back again tonight. And I think he travels to somewhere in Chicago for a family or business, and they stop here on the way and on the way back. So a lot of that happens and a lot of great customers in the store and in the bed and breakfast.

**Henry:** When we were deciding about a bed and breakfast, we did a lot of research, and although a bed breakfast, some people have a romantic desire, maybe retiring someday and building or converting some place into a bed and breakfast and having a business during the retirement years, but you don't run a bed and breakfast, you don't build a bed and breakfast, you're married to a bed and breakfast. And so your life is committed to that business. And that was the unfortunate thing for Linda whenever she was running the business and allowing me to take groups of Jamaica. She just couldn't. She couldn't leave. She had customers and she had a store to run. But the couple that we have that run the store makes that possible for us now. We also realize that a bed and breakfast, you have to make a bed and breakfast as a destination, a stand alone destination. Apart from anything else in the area that might be available, people would want to come to your place in particular. And so we have two and a half acres, and they're all they're all usable acres. We have a stream that runs through our property. We're in a Shagbark hickory area, and we have lots of trees, and we have gardens, and aquatic aquatic ponds, and all those kinds of things like that. We're a half a mile off Interstate 80, and we're right next to the entrance to Treasure Lake. And people have access to Treasure Lake because of our association with them. So that's really been a big help for us. And besides, we're the only bed and breakfast in the area.

**Linda:** Right now.

**Josiah:** Yeah.

**Linda:** And the elk have been a big draw; I'm sure you all know that.

**Josiah:** Yeah.

**Linda:** We have people come back all times of the year, not just in the fall.

**Josiah:** Right.

**Linda:** You know, to go visit the elk, so that's been a big draw for us.

**Josiah:** It sure has. Yeah. We've utilized that ourselves as a tourism agency; we focus a lot on the elk viewing as well. But I want to thank you. Thank you for plugging Treasure Lake Resort too. That's important. It's nice to have good partners in the industry. And that kind of leads me into the next question. Any programs, resources or organizations that you found helpful that you'd encourage other small business owners to check out?

**Linda:** Well, the chamber is very helpful, our DuBois Chamber. Anything you need, any kind of advertising you want to pass through them, they're always ready to take it on and they do it immediately. I appreciate that. We're also part of the Clearfield County Tourism, and the Pennsylvania Great Outdoors, too. We're kind of a side issue with that since we aren't in Jefferson County, but they're good about pushing our advertising out too.

**Henry:** And we're on all the national search engines. So if you're traveling, if you're traveling across country and you know that your first trip, you're coming from Massachusetts and your first day, you're going to a layover somewhere in central Pennsylvania and type in, there are certain people like to stay in bed and breakfast rather than hotels. So we kind of come up on the search engine, even Airbnb.

**Linda:** We pop up on all of them. So that's good.

**Josiah:** Yeah, sure. Yeah. And you had the signs out there on 80 as well, so that's pretty good advertising. So you were just referencing too, as someone's coming from Massachusetts, they're halfway to wherever they're going. DuBois is a great stop, and that is for most major cities -- anybody traveling to any of the major cities, say from Chicago to D.C. or New York or whatever, maybe -- and that's kind of our slogan here at Visit Clearfield County, is we are halfway to everywhere. Everywhere's a little bit, you know, vague, but it's true. I mean, we go to different hotels. I'll ask people, you know, why are they here? And a lot of the times they're meeting family because it's a halfway point or they're halfway to somewhere.

**Linda:** A good stopping point. Yeah.

**Josiah:** So we're kind of lucky. We have the convenience of Interstate 80 right there in our backyard. So that's great to hear. Yeah, the chamber, I know that they've been very supportive of all the small businesses as well. It's always important to be a part of that. Any silver linings in this awful situation?

**Linda:** Well, I mean, most of us had good health precautions put in place, but any time you are tempted to skip that, it makes you think, no, I shouldn't. I know I probably should always be that way. So if it has taught us anything, even though we all have common sense, I think, it's to be more aware of it. So that you're protecting yourself all the time, not just when there's an episode like this.

**Josiah:** Yeah, I think that's important too. It's kind of crazy, all the soap and hand sanitizer and everything, toilet paper, that's gone missing. You're like, well, what were you doing before?

**Henry:** I think having your finances in order too, not not overextending yourself because you don't know when something like this is going to happen, and if you're really thin and you're having a hard time surviving even before something like this happens, you know, you can crash and burn real real quick. So we've been fortunate enough to always be able to go without borrowing any money or anything like that. We've always been debt free.

**Josiah:** Good. That's great to hear. Do you have a moment of humanity or inspiration that has helped you get through these tough times?

**Henry:** Well, obviously, our faith. You know, we believe all things work out for good and even bad things work out for good. You know, the scripture says that for those who love the Lord, all things work out. We've been more appreciative of our faith. And then we're also involved in a small group of several couples who get together, you know, a couple of times a month. And so that was a substitute for not being able to meet in a church setting, you know, show all those couples we drew together a lot closer doing that because there were all going through the same thing.

**Josiah:** Sure. And I know for myself, from my church, we weren't able to meet, so we made it a point to use social media for videos.

**Henry:** Yeah.

**Josiah:** It was actually a good opportunity to reach out to those that may be unsaved and may not go to church. They were following those videos and watching those videos.

**Henry:** Yes.

**Josiah:** You could look at this as a situation where it's good or bad. For the most part, you know, to get through it and look at it in a positive aspect and again, slow down and see what's important, I think that was what it was really all about.

**Linda:** And the fear factor wasn't there.

**Josiah:** Right.

**Linda:** The fear factor isn't there for us. It's like, if that happens, we're not in charge. One of these days people will realize they're not in charge.

**Josiah:** Yep, I agree. You're right.

**Linda:** What's going to happen is going to happen, you just kind of go with the flow.

**Josiah:** Right.

**Henry:** Yeah.

**Josiah:** OK. Well, again, Linda, Henry, thank you so much for taking the time to allow me to interview you. And again, for those watching the interview and other resources for small businesses in the PA Wilds can be found at [WildsCoPA.org](http://WildsCoPA.org). That's also where you can apply and share your story. So, again, thank you. And take care.

**Linda:** You're welcome. Thanks so much!

**Henry:** Thank you.

**Josiah:** Goodbye!

**Henry:** Bye.