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Laura Lee and Jesse Robinson of La Belle Auberge Bed & Breakfast and Emerge Healing Arts & Spa are interviewed by PA Wilds Ambassador Ellen Matis from Hello Social Co.

Ellen: Hi and welcome to the next episode in the Wilds are Working series. My name is Ellen Matis, and I'm the owner of Hello Social Co. I'm a PA Wilds ambassador. Today I am interviewing Laura Lee and Jesse Robinson of La Belle Auberge Bed and Breakfast. So today, Laura Lee and Jesse are going to share how their organization has kind of pivoted in the last couple of months in what is really an uncharted time for businesses. Welcome.

Jesse: Hello.

Laura Lee: Good morning. Thank you for having us.

Ellen: Yeah. Thanks for coming on. So just to get started off, tell us about both of your businesses and kind of their history.

Laura Lee: Sure. Yeah. So we own two businesses in downtown Wellsboro. We're a full service spa and a Aveda salon. It's called Emerge Healing Arts and Spa. We've been serving the community for probably about 10 years, maybe seven years as Emerge. We have five employees. We offer a few, pretty wide scope of services from massage, which is like our bread and butter, but we do facials, advance skin therapy, body treatments just kind of whole nails ... you can come and get pretty much every service. And then again, like I said, an Aveda salon. So we had a beautiful three story building just right here downtown. And then we also have a bed and breakfast, which we have had since 2002. Previously, it was my grandmother's way back. So I have a long history actually with the bed and breakfast. I started here with my massage practice, went out and built a big spa and then we collaborated them together.

Ellen: So awesome. So obviously, you have some family history here. But why Wellsboro? Why do you think that this business is great for the PA Wilds community?

Laura Lee: Yeah. So, you know, as young as I can remember, I learned to tie an apron around my waist and helped my grandmother in her business. So definitely like you said, the family history of being an entrepreneur emerged from that piece. But Jess is a born and raised Wellsboro man. So we have a real fond connection with the PA Wilds. One of the best things I think about serving our guests is being local and, you know, loving the landscape that we live in. We're just minutes from the Grand Canyon and the bike trail and every free minute we have, we're out there in the green. Yesterday we went and waded in the creek to get through the day.

Ellen: That sounds amazing. So obviously, you know, when things started changing in March, you would have had to make some kind of changes to your business model. So what are some of the changes that you made earlier this year amid COVID-19? And what are some of the things that you're doing now that we're in the Green phase?

Laura Lee: Yeah. So we looked at the big model, the big picture. We made some huge changes. What we decided to do is sell our three story spa building and to transition that whole business into our bed and breakfast. So we've made some huge transitions. We're now considered a destination spot. We have three rooms where we're serving clients. It's now our home. We live here. And once our renovations are complete, we'll still have five treatment rooms and the salon. So we've looked at the model from, you know, pretty big picture, made some big choices that, you know, why didn't we work smarter in the past? So we're putting all under one roof. Even though we've been Green for about a month, we are just now opening this coming Wednesday to guests and then the following Monday for the spa. So the transition period, you know, we needed time to get moved in and make the changes and then also implementing the preparatory things, doing it right, feeling comfortable with all the new COVID regulations and that we can reach our people in a safest way possible was really important to us. So we've kind of need that transition period. So what we are doing was one thing for COVID. I think for the bed and breakfast, the biggest thing is we could be a full service buffet. You know, we had a buffet breakfast. Now we're serving breakfast in rooms. So that's one big transition that we're making. You know, common areas are no longer common areas to be, you know, protected. The health. And then on the massage side, facials are considered illegal. We can't practice facials at this time. But for our employees, you know, we have five employees coming back. There are lots of precautions to think about as far as masking and, you know, for our industry they're recommending changing clothes in between each client. The way the space is set up, you have to think of things from a totally different perspective as far as universal precautions for infection control. So, you know, those things are really important and make us feel more comfortable going back out into the world and serving the public. So we've taken a very cautious route. We'll continue to have those high standards.

Ellen: Awesome. And first of all, congratulations on reopening this week. That's exciting. I would ask you how you made the most of your downtime, but it sounds like you've been pretty busy. What downtime?

Laura Lee: Well, we had a few weeks of, like, grace, right? Got to my yoga mat every day and it was like, 'whoa, this is so weird to have some me time.' It was good. We needed that little little pause before we jumped in with two feet.

Ellen: Sure. Absolutely. Are you able to share how many employees you have for your business?

Laura Lee: Yep. So we have five employees.

Ellen: OK. And what kind of approaches will you take then? You talked about the approaches to protecting your customers. What kind of approaches are you taking to protect those employees?

Laura Lee: Yep. So similar standards. You know, the training probably. We've just found so many resources. It's been really exciting to see our industry step up. They relate to the game. You know, the standards were not clear from the beginning. Even state law for salons and massage therapy didn't hit the scene until three weeks after everybody opened. So nobody knew what was required and what wasn't required. But now from not necessarily just the state level, the state has also stepped up now and made specific boundaries that are very clear, you know, what has to happen, but also on a much larger scale. There's seminars, there's this, there's that for whole massage industries, what's expected. So I think the biggest.... The guest, the customer experience is different. They arrive, they have to text us that they've arrived. We say that it's safe to come in and arrive. So there's like a million little steps along the way. They have to sign a COVID release form, releasing the business of liability, making sure that they understand the scope of what they're receiving. You know, there's just so many aspects. But the biggest thing, I think, for what makes me feel safe is that our industry is recommended to wear an N-95 mask because you're in a small space with your people. We have cloth masks that get changed in between each client. I could go on and on and on about looking to keep our employees safe.

Ellen: Right.

Laura Lee: So there are a lot of steps, you know, like I said, changing clothes between each client. There are a lot of things that we are doing, you know, to the extreme. If it's recommended, we're doing it. You have to keep your shoes on, you know, just to be work shoes disinfect them at the end of the day, put them in a bin. There's a lot of steps.

Ellen: Yeah, well, kudos to you for being super proactive about it.

Laura Lee: Yep. And makes you feel more comfortable as a business. You know, you're doing everything that you can in your power. You do what you can.

Ellen: Yeah.

Laura Lee: Yeah.

Ellen: Are there any programs or resources maybe that you find helpful along the way or something that you would want to share that other business owners might want to check out?

Laura Lee: Yeah, so I think one of the biggest things for me has been Facebook groups. So like, I joined, you know, a specific massage Facebook group, a specific bed and breakfast ... Facebook group. So it's really cool

to see, like not just on a state level, but on a national level. You know, the whole world is dealing with this at some level or another. So it's really cool to be able to connect with other business people. I think that's been the coolest resource for me, especially as things have unwound and, you know, there still will be issues that we run into. So when you're connected with the people that are doing the same thing as you are, that's been a really great resource for us and definitely our banks. You know, that's been our saving grace through all this. There's no way we would be where we are today without deferment, payment deferments and support in that way. I mean, you can't go from, you know, being a five person, full-service spa and four person huge revenue to no revenue for three months and not imagine that you are going to be able to make.

Ellen: Right. Is there maybe any moment of humanity or inspiration that's helped you along the way or kept you going during a super stressful time?

Laura Lee: Yeah, I think for sure. One of the coolest things has been from other people, you know. Clients have sent us checks in advance And, you know, it's like the sense of community, I think, on so many levels from the Chamber of Commerce to your fellow businessmen, to your fellow town, to your clients, to your community, like everyone has been so supportive and in whatever the gift that they have to give. Whether it's just checking in. You know, my sweet little old lady calls and says, 'how are you doing?' I say, 'how are you doing? You need groceries?' Or you know what I mean? Just the sense of community. It makes you realize that human interaction is what what world is about. That's why we're here. And the more we can support each other. I think this situation has been full of challenges for every person in the world. You know, so do to see that sense of humanity come through and people support one another has definitely been the most touching and profound thing for me.

Ellen: Yeah. So true. So if you're watching this and you want to know more information about how to support small businesses and the PA Wilds, make sure to visit WildsCoPA.org. There you're going to find all of the interviews that have been held so far, and applications to appear on the series are still being accepted. So if you're a business owner or you work for an organization and you'd like to share your story about how you've pivoted amid COVID-19, make sure to hop on that website and you can apply. But Laura Lee and Jesse, thank you so much for your time and for joining us on the Wilds Are Working.

Laura Lee: Thank you. Thank you for all you guys do. We really appreciate you.

Ellen: All right. We'll catch you guys next time.

Laura Lee: Okay, bye!

Jesse: Bye!