

Making new memories

After months of sitting empty, the Inn of Waterloo reopened with new management and a second lease on life



BY DAWN MATHESON
PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

On first glance, it is a giant concrete block, moored on eight hectares of a mostly asphalt sea at the confluence of Conestoga Parkway and King and Weber streets in Waterloo.

But within that shell are more than four decades of memories and moments of lives lived that Sharon Hales not only wants to preserve but expand upon.

Reopened in June as the Inn of Waterloo, the former Waterloo Inn — originally the Waterloo Motor Inn when it opened in 1972 — has bedded down business folk, newlyweds, travellers, high school grads

and Oktoberfest celebrators for any type of occasion that brought people together.

“Everyone I know has a story about a time spent at the inn,” says the indomitable Hales, a local girl and president of ABB Hotel Management Group, which reopened the inn this past spring.

“This place means so much to so many. It’s all the stories that really pushed me to keep it going,” says Hales, who grew up just outside Elmira and now lives in Kitchener. Hales’ sister had her honeymoon night here and, just last year, Hales stayed overnight after an Oktoberfest party.

In December 2015, the Waterloo Inn shut its doors when Drewlo Holdings Inc. purchased the property, leaving 120 staff without jobs, including president and managing director Mary D’Alton, hundreds of events without venues and the end to a long line of stories.

No one knew what was next for the iconic establishment situated at the gateway to Waterloo. The site, zoned commercial with some industrial and the possibility of residential, sits on prime land: near a future light rail transit stop with easy access to the expressway. Many speculated that the sprawling building would be torn down or turned into highrise apartments.

While awaiting its fate, the inn sat empty over Christmas, except for the rotating security staff wandering the halls and guarding the 155 rooms, the 21,000 square feet of conference space, gorgeous indoor pool and atrium, garden courtyard, massive

kitchen that rivals Toronto’s Four Seasons Hotel in size and equipment, former disco and popular nightclub and an almost 7,000-square-foot ballroom.

In January, Hales, whose company develops and manages hotel projects, got a call from a real estate agent to view the property. Word was Drewlo wanted to see if anyone could make a go of it as a conference hotel again.

Hales was already swamped managing

all the other ABB properties (in the past year, her company has launched five hotels across the country) and running her own company, SMH Hospitality Consulting, not to mention her other life: the solo care of her two children, eight and 12 (“Yes, I’m a hockey mom!”). But she just *had* to take a look.

On a mild Wednesday in February, Hales brought along Arnold (Arnie) Brown, one of two partners with ABB (the other is his son, Kirby), for a tour of the property.

“What are you getting yourself into?” teased the 87-year-old Brown. “Arnie understood my excitement,” says Hales, who describes Brown as an energetic 45-year-old in an old man’s body. “He loves the (hospitality) business just as much as me.”

“My first thought when we did the walk-through was, ‘This would be so amazing!’ My second: ‘Holy crap. It’s so massive.’” It wasn’t the number of rooms; it was the sheer size of the property that was over-

TOP: Sharon Hales, of Kitchener, is president of ABB Hotel Management Inc., which reopened the Inn of Waterloo (formerly the Waterloo Inn) this past spring.

OPPOSITE: Signatures and well wishes decorate an exposed section of drywall.



whelming. Hales says she could fit four of her hotels overtop of the inn. “You should see the basement! Most hotels we build now don’t even have a basement. And the halls, kitchen, tower, storage space, plus offices ... offices that have their own washrooms.”

For a rural girl who launched her hospitality career as a “salad girl” at the Stone Crock in St. Jacobs during middle school, revitalizing and transforming the region’s largest conference hotel into the more modern and profitable “Inn of Waterloo” in a matter of months would be this director of operations’ biggest project to date.

Hales grew up on a small hobby farm outside Elmira. The family of six kids — she’s the second youngest — helped dad tend to the pigs and other barnyard animals when he was on the road. Playford Hales ran a trucking business, heading out in his own truck by 4 a.m. each day so as to return to his home office when it was still business hours. Young Hales witnessed first hand the motivation, initiative and organi-

zational skills required to run a company. Hales’ mom, Dolly, ran her own mini hotel of sorts with the six kids to care for, plus fitting in her part-time work while the kids were at school at Brox’s restaurant in Elmira and in the evenings at the Elmira Raceway.

When a new McDonald’s came to town, Hales left the Stone Crock for a shot at the “cool place to work.” She quickly moved up to swing manager, remaining part time at the Golden Arches throughout high school and into college, where she studied hotel and restaurant management at Fanshawe in London.

Hales always thought she’d run a restaurant one day but figured she had better get some hotel experience in to round out her resumé. Upon graduation, she moved to Burlington and applied at the Venture Inn. She got the job and, within three months, Hales was promoted to front office manager. In her third year, the Venture Inn’s general manager moved to Halifax and Hales was offered the position, making her the second

youngest female general manager in the management company.

“It is a male-dominated industry in management for sure,” says Hales, “but Venture likes to hire female managers.” Women are natural organizers, good with people, detail-oriented and multitaskers, says Hales, who explained that things are changing from the “old-school way, where women were in the background doing all the work, making the men up front look good.”

When a Best Western was to open in St. Jacobs in 1998, Hales set her sights closer to home. Hired as assistant manager of the hotel, she met two men who would both become mentors. One of them was Arnold Brown, hotel managing partner with shares in many Best Westerns. “Over the course of 13 years, I learned so much from him, from the day-to-day operations to acquiring land or a hotel and building or renovating it. And his wife, Barbara, she did all the design for the hotel.”

The other mentor was Larry Martin,

director of operations. “Larry had such huge spirit,” says Hales of Martin, a local Mennonite who died in 2013. Martin had little background in hotels but lots in restaurants, so the two made a great team: Martin with his passion and people skills, and Hales as uber-organizer with hotel experience. “For Larry, everything is about guests. He would come early in the morning and clear cars off in the parking lot if there had been a snowstorm. And come late on a Sunday night to scrub the hot tub.”

Taking Martin’s cue in customer service, Hales took hotel guests on tours to show off her community. From the many trips with her father looking for animals for the hobby farm, she knew the St. Jacobs livestock auctions well. “I took these big-city American businessmen from Campbell’s Soup. They were simply amazed at the scene and at the Mennonites.” A couple days later, Hales had a rather “hilarious call” from a guy she knew from the stockyards. Her

Best Western name tag must have fallen off on the viewing bridges above the stalls. “He said he found it stuck to the back of a cow.” Certainly not a story just anyone can tell.

Martin, who recognized her passion in the business, sold her part of his shares in the hotel. “He was a hugely generous man.” So began Hales’ career in hotel ownership and management. Not long after, in 2011, she and the father-son Browns started ABB Hotel Management Group Inc. Hales’ youngest brother, Tony, now works at their Best Western hotel in London.

Hales describes ABB as very small — most big property management companies are large with many consultants. With ABB, it has been pretty much just Hales and her two partners directing everything from design, construction, project management, development, financing, real estate, restaurant concepts, food and beverage operations, operations, sales and marketing and accounting, until last year when Kyle Bingham was hired to assist with a few of

the management contracts. “He’s awesome. He’s such a hard worker and he’s a single guy so is free to travel,” says Hales, who is in a constant juggling act between work and kids.

In overseeing the transformation from the Waterloo Inn into the Inn of Waterloo, Hales describes Bingham as essential, keeping him at the inn full time for the time being. Another weight lifted, Hales decided to outsource the food. One of Canada’s most important culinary stars, Jonathan Gushue’s Berlin Catering Company will take on the kitchen.

Though the hotel name change may be subtle — “We want to honour the history, plus keep it Google-able” — the inside design overhaul was not. In a review search on Trip Adviser, one of the first descriptions to come up is “dated.” Though the hotel has great bones, Hales says the design needed to be spruced up. “We needed to breathe fresh air into this place.”

Hales already had a great working relation-

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TOP: Last year, Kyle Bingham, a consultant, was hired to assist Hales and her team with management contracts.
BOTTOM: ABB Hotel Management Group has partnered with Home Hardware. The hardware company provides furniture, paint and flooring, among other things, for the Inn of Waterloo.

flooring, paint, light bulbs, cleaning products, hardware and more.

For one of the bigger challenges, Home Hardware's Beauti Tone paint design and sales team came in to advise on the paint job covering up the oak in the lobby.
 "What a great chance to show off," says Goyette, who will host a tour of the inn in September as part of the national dealer show for Home Hardware owners from across the country. An alcove in the front lobby will remain a living showcase, featuring a vignette of furnishings available from Home Hardware's furniture division. "We'll change it quarterly to keep it fresh," says Goyette.

As a tribute to the partnership, Hales outfitted the male front-desk staff with bow ties, co-founder of Home Hardware Walter Hachborn's signature look.
 "Sharon was pretty well a one-woman show," says Goyette, who confessed to corresponding at 2 a.m. some days just to make their five-week remodelling deadline. When Goyette attended the soft opening in June, he stayed overnight. "The place looked great. There were so many people supporting Sharon and the inn. Lots of locals."

Hales says she has rehired as many hotel staff as she can, including a 35-year veteran who met his wife at the inn. "This place means something to everyone," Hales says, and she wants to collect these stories and make them a part of the décor. "I want to frame the stories as handwritten pieces of art for the rooms. And hang historical photos of events held here." Hales even talks about launching a call for online videos of recorded stories for the hotel website.
 For the time being, there are at least a few more years to start making new memories at the redesigned Inn of Waterloo. ABB is contracted for five years, with the option of two two-year term renewals. 

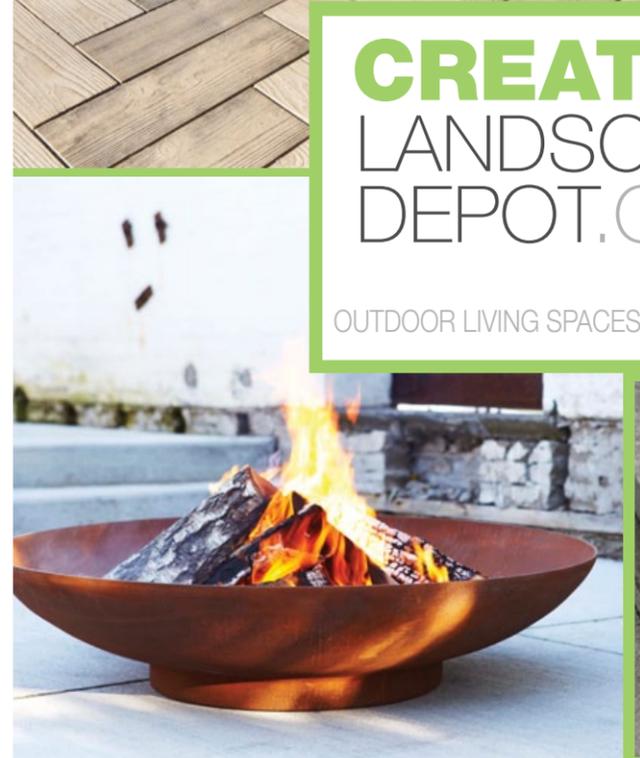


ship sourcing paper and cleaning products for her Best Western Hotels from Home Hardware, but she had an idea to take things a step further. A leap is more like it.
 At the opening at Best Western London, a chat with Alex Goyette, Home Hardware's commercial sales and marketing program co-ordinator at the head office in St.

Jacobs — near the original Home Hardware — turned into a full-fledged partnership between one of the most iconic local brands in the region and the landmark hotel. Goyette says this venture is the company's first foray into full commercial hospitality servicing, providing everything interior: furniture, art, linens,



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