

Passion Soars at Wild Wing in the Stonebridge Town



CITY GIRL WITH A COUNTRY HEART FINDS SUCCESS AT THE BEACH. "To me, Wild Wing Wasaga Beach isn't just a business. It is a link to community and a sense of belonging. It's a place where people come to enjoy something just a little bit different than an ordinary experience. There doesn't need to be a special event to make every event special. Whether someone stops in for drinks, a family meal, a lunch on the run or a whole day or night out event — I believe if I put my heart into what I do they will leave with just a little piece of what life is all about; going for what you want, and realizing your dreams," says Mary Ann Watts, franchise owner of Wild Wing in the Stonebridge Town Centre.

When Wild Wing Wasaga Beach opened in October 2007, it was one of the first businesses to call the Stonebridge Town Centre home and Mary Ann is one of the busiest merchants. She can usually be seen at Wild Wing events, taking photographs at and participating in Stonebridge events.

Her road to success has been indirect and twisting, having to forge her own path at the age of 17 when her father died. Along the way, a successful search for her biological mother led to very close friendships with her mother and stepfather.

Nothing was ever handed to her she says. Mary Ann has a law enforcement diploma from Seneca College and eventually became the first occupational health and safety officer for all its 13 campuses.

Next Mary Ann nurtured her passion for health and fitness: She earned her CPTN certification (Certified Professional Trainers Network), then spent 13 years as the owner of a fitness club in Keswick. After she sold the facility, she followed her passion for photography studying it at Ryerson.

Since 1984, Mary Ann has been a professional wedding photographer "capturing some of the most intimate and happy moments for keepsake mementos of memories that photography would keep alive," says the owner of Watts Photography.

After Mary Ann sold her fitness facility, she needed to regroup and develop another business plan, so she spent the summer of 2007 in Wasaga Beach and never left. A conversation with Stonebridge developer Mark Crowe about his vision for Stonebridge influenced her decision to stay and she took another leap of faith: Back then the Stonebridge Town Centre was comprised of only a TD Bank branch and Walmart. Mary Ann didn't know anyone in Wasaga Beach, but she felt comfortable here, had the drive to succeed and business experience.

She had been working in Wild Wing's corporate office as a marketing director: Over a six-month period Mary Ann's determination to open her own Wild Wing grew. She approached company founder Rick Smicalas

and when he asked where, she immediately said Wasaga Beach. They signed the lease that night.

"Looking back, I was what might be described as fearless. I believed so much in the Wild Wing owners and the Stonebridge vision to make a successful business in a growing small town," Mary Ann says. Within a year of opening Mary Ann expanded Wild Wing. She believes in the chain's great service, unique food selections and "the creation of community by way of businesses that provide both locals and tourists with an upbeat, entertaining experience," she adds. There is no corporate policy at Wild Wing that requires franchise owners to organize events.

"One of the most successful events with record numbers was the Wasaga Beach Blues Festival in September 2013. Events like these help support the Town and drive business throughout Stonebridge Town Centre. New visitors and our regular friendly locals create the perfect setting, inviting everyone interested in destination places or 'staycations' throughout the year to think of Wasaga Beach first," Mary Ann says.

From July to September, Wild Wing offers live entertainment Saturday nights on the patio. In addition it creates special events such as a Halloween Bash, Haunted Gazebo, New Year's Eve Cheer and the Spring Fever Motorcycle Rally, now its fifth year. Mary Ann also organizes Santa's Castle (photos with Santa). The staff loves to help charities; it's their way of giving back to the community. Mary Ann and the Wild Wing staff participate in other events such as Canada Day celebrations, Music in Park and the Wasaga Beach Short Film Festival (WBSFF). This year Mary Ann won a Platinum Award at the WBSFF for directing the music video "There is a Light" starring singer-songwriter Rebecca Stephens.

"On a personal level, being a part of the Wasaga Beach Film Festival has been one of my greatest creative adventures," Mary Ann says.

Mary Ann understands that being involved and creative make good business sense — and dollars. Wild Wing will continue to be the hot spot in Wasaga Beach for residents and tourists: She is thinking about hosting more contests like tattoos and hot wings, plus more karaoke parties and ladies' nights.

"Looking ahead to the rest of 2014, I plan to stay my course with the vision of offering new events that will leave locals and tourists with memorable experiences," she says.

Mary Ann has always had her own definition of success and that requires perseverance, self-motivation, passion and vision to make those goals a reality.

"I succeed because I am determined to, not because I was destined to."

