

Notes from Interview with Liz Webster

3 August 2020

Today we're with Liz Webster and I'm Fiona Rollings, Association Secretary. Liz, together with her husband Neil, owns and operates Websters on Wanaka Lodge and Apartments. Liz has a background in education and health, holding a number of national roles. She also owned a business for 20 plus years employing up to 20 staff. Liz brings to the Board skills in mentoring staff as a business and professional leader, strategic planning and development as well as national and international accreditation. And, if being a board member and running her own business isn't enough, Liz is also the President of the Wanaka B&B Association which is an active and collaborative group of members from the wider Wanaka area.

Welcome along today and can we share a little about you and your family. I know over Covid you had a lot of family staying with you, including your grandchildren. Are they still there or has everybody managed to dissipate a little?

No, they are all there. I think life is a bit comfortable for them here. We made the decision due to Covid to close the Lodge over winter. In Wanaka we have multiple seasons - summer and winter and they are both quite different seasons. We tend to do more apartment style accommodation in the winter whereas it has previously B&B by the room during the summer. We were in the unique situation where family had just moved to Wanaka and they were looking for accommodation. We were busy during the summer and they hadn't found anything suitable and suddenly lockdown was on us so it was very easy with a six bed six bath property to accommodate family. Because our winter market is not that strong in bed and breakfast and, there is something like 100 engineers come in from overseas for the winter to work at our proving ground which is like a big car testing station on the top of the snow farm, previously in the winters we have bundled up an offer to those teams. They have all their meals up the hill except they can have breakfast if they want and we supply that if they want it, in our little apartment. Because they are not here this year the family got the opportunity to stay a bit longer than perhaps they might have. They are currently building a house so hopefully by the time the house is built and summer comes along and the travel bubble opens it will all be go for bed and breakfast again. Many people do close during the winter and just stay open throughout the summer so it wasn't a big interference, but yes, it makes it dynamic with nine in the house.

It will be very quiet when they all move out ...

Yes, especially during school hours but I think many people can identify with that.

How long have you owned your B&B? And why did you get into the B&B industry?

We decided to, interestingly enough use the term, "retire" to Wanaka but we were a little bit young at 55 to not do too much. We were both doing consultancy work - Neil is an electrical engineer and he does a lot of consultancy work for a number of industries but he was primarily working for Fonterra and travelling. I was doing educational consultancy work and often in the North Island so we decided to move to Wanaka. We found this lovely big house that had been a Lodge in the old days when it was the "Black Book" and Bed & Breakfast book. It was called Drummonds on Wanaka. When we came to the town and brought the property people in the B&B industry probably wondered what those people were going to do with the property. The Drummonds had not been entirely unsuccessful but hadn't had a big opportunity to run it because they ... (phone interruption) ...

So I had probably too much time on my hands and I thought it can't be that hard to get it started again because it had been about a year and a half. It was pre internet days so people hadn't been booking through online booking channels. I figured it out, I think we were about the 10th business on Booking.com in those days in 2011 and now there is 150 businesses in Wanaka on Booking.com. That was really just at the turning point in the industry. I joined the local B&B group and before I knew it the person who was my predecessor, the President

said “Well you can do it”. I’m thinking you don’t even know who I am or what I’m capable of. She said “I think you could have a turn”. So I thought, well I come from a teaching background where you do take turns - and the turn is still mine!

We’ve been running Websters on Wanaka since 2011. It’s a lovely big property with 2 acres so we worked out how to do weddings and events, had a lot of fun meeting lots of different people. Gave the property a total make over in the landscaping department which didn’t have a tree or a bush on it at the time just a house on the hill. We’ve done lots of different things with the property and look back on it and think how did we have the energy or enthusiasm now, almost 10 years later.

You mentioned that you joined the Association – why did you join the Association?

I guess I was in a situation where I didn’t have a clue what I was doing because I was in a house that is a six bedroom six bathroom property. I was thinking those other people ran accommodation and maybe that’s an alternative source of income. I went to our RTO Lake Wanaka Tourism and they said you need to talk to Rosie. Rosie was the guru of bed and breakfast in town. She already knew about me, not personally or hadn’t met me, but knew that we’d brought the property. She invited me along to coffee, a bit like everybody starts getting involved, and before I knew it, if I paid such and such I got all the information. I thought that’s not hard to do and before I knew it I was part of Wanaka Bed & Breakfast. I didn’t even know too much about @home New Zealand (before BBANZ). But I got to meet quite a few other people because it was a big group. It had about 30 members, but only about 3-4 ever turned up for coffee. I think coming along, one of the things, that I brought to the Group was the collaboration not the competition. Everybody probably looked after their own patch a little bit. Some worked with agents and some did this and some did that. They were on the surface very congenial as you are in a small town but nobody particularly shared a lot of information. When I started my turn leading the Group I thought if we’re in competition with anybody we’re in competition with the motels and the backpackers and the camping grounds around here. We’re not in competition with each other. Within a year or two, we got 15-20 members at our coffees. We still do depending on the day and time. Other people in this day and age and with the current situation have picked up part time jobs. They’ve gone back to part time teaching or working in a family business that’s an alternative to their B&B. So unfortunately that’s had a bit of an impact on how many get together at any one time because we’re trying work and everybody has set routines around what they do which wasn’t perhaps the case probably from about the last 5 years. Everybody pretty much worked full time on their B&B and they were so pleased to see others and chew the fat and tell funny stories. That’s what people got out of joining and what I personally got out of joining. Joining an association wasn’t a long shot for somebody who comes from a teaching background as we have lots of structures in our nursing and teaching areas. It is interesting that many people felt finally that they could come to a group where it was safe to share having a bad day and a bad set of guests. That’s what made it popular. I always remember one member saying “it’s my absolute favourite group”. She’s in Rotary and this thing and that thing and I said to her “what makes it so special?” “Everybody talks to each other”. Sometimes you go to a big group and these people talk amongst themselves and those ones talk amongst themselves but there’s no one where everyone kind of gets welcomed with a smile and says how are you, haven’t seen you for ages. I think that’s what I tried to bring to the group.

I think there are a couple of great points that you’ve touched on. I think the technology changes have really opened it up so that people don’t have to keep their cards as close to their chest as they used to and because of that and because of the type of industry we are, we can really be more welcoming and talk and share more with people. Everybody has the same issues with Booking.com, so it is always good to be able to get together to be able to share those

What we’ve found is that some people are really tech savvy especially the younger ones that are doing it as a full time job and they know about channel managers. A lot of our older members that have been around for 15 plus years didn’t know what a channel manager did and they were trying to manage multiple bookings. Caroline jumps to mind, she would go and get them organised and get a listing up for them on Booking.com. They were so grateful. Our latest initiative, which is very popular, is a Whatsapp group. As soon as somebody gets someone who walks in the door, if they can’t take them, and it is interesting to watch because before you’ve even had time to look somebody says I have a cottage or I have a room. Then just with lots of other things going on if you wanted to get everyone’s attention and, again, Caroline has everyone on the list so even the people that didn’t know what What’sapp was. It’s about helping each other.

What do you think the challenges will be for B&Bs over the next 2-3 years?

That has changed dramatically this year. There were probably other challenges I had in mind before covid came along. I think having come from a meeting yesterday our biggest challenge is setting ourselves apart from Airbnb which, as everyone knows, is just another platform like Booking.com and becoming more like Booking.com as days go by, so that NZers know what it is like to stay in a B&B. The NZers travelling freely and to places like Wanaka and Queenstown this winter several members have said that people are using them. Especially the bigger ones like lodges, and smaller ones too, it's the younger ones that love the B&B because, number one, they get out of bed and have breakfast and they are always really surprised even though it says it in all the information. They love that we can refer them to, and ring up and do it on the phone and hand it to them, a wine tour or whatever or ski pass for the mountains. With certain types of our members, the bigger ones, buses and shuttles will even pull into us just like they do to some of the hotels so they can get a ride straight from here to there. They just like that personalised service. It is one of the biggest challenges is about getting visibility and one of the things that we are doing locally here because we do have a group that can collaborate and we have a social media buff in amongst our midst who knows how to do that targeted marketing, we're just trying to work out how to get a fresh approach to what bed and breakfast means that's not that old "oh my god I'm staying somebody's house I don't know in a room that I don't know about". Making it a more professional option for people to choose. I think it is about educating the NZers. If you're talking about Americans or English or Europeans, they all know about bed and breakfast but kiwis are probably more interested in self contained or other, more accustomed to using those other types of accommodation.

Liz, you mentioned the size of the properties and the big hotels and motels, do you think that being smaller properties, B&Bs are usually smaller properties, do you think that will be an advantage in the post covid 19 world?

I think people like to choose and because bookings inevitably come through Booking.com or Airbnb or whatever peoples chosen vehicle is, even if people have a slightly self-contained area or even if they had a couple of rooms that were B&B but they are in a different part of the house. People are thinking about using that as a one group booking especially in these covid times instead of having two rooms out to two different people. People are taking their B&B rooms off the listing and selling it as a suite if it does not have a full kitchen or a compact apartment. People are trying to line themselves up to be an attractive opportunity and whether they're small and just got one or two rooms or they are actually bigger, when they are bigger they've actually got less options to be flexible depending on how their house or property is set out. Some of our B&B here are as many as 8 rooms. Some people might consider them a boutique hotel but they are not really because the people live on site in a small self contained area in a big B&B. They probably have less options to be flexible but they're doing breakfast differently and so I think as long as it is a small personalised service and people can feel safe and they have an understanding of how it works. Our job is to tell our story depending on what our property is that will work for those NZ people that are coming to stay because it looks like it will be about year before we get too many overseas visitors.

If you could do one thing differently, looking back, when starting a B&B what would it be?

I think we all learn as we go and think we won't do that again. We try different things out. I don't think there is anything I wouldn't have done. I really enjoyed it for about six or seven years when Neil and I were the only ones and we had no other family here, we sunk ourselves into the business and did weddings and a whole range of things and had lots of overseas guests. When we have this property out we have five bedrooms and I can't believe we used to have 10 for breakfast. And we had to, mostly we are set up for 8 to 10. I think you just refine your operation and then suddenly gradually family came to town that made this more a home base for them so it was actually quite hard to keep it separate as a Lodge. It is nice to have a break now and have the winter off – it's the first winter in 10 years that we've had family instead of guests but we will get back into it for summer. In answer to that, there's probably nothing that I wouldn't do but there's some things that we've done differently as time's gone on to meet our own personal needs and to, probably like as we are at the moment, meeting the market.

Before we go Liz, is there anything else you'd like to add or say ...

It is interesting, we travel a lot and I come to board meetings and come up the country, I can't help but wonder as you travel up any country road in NZ and you see that B&B sign, I guess for me personally I know that they're not a member, I wonder why people don't choose to reach out to a professional group? I wonder for the small

amount of money involved and huge payoff. The payoff comes in lots of different ways. It's that emotional connection that's a connection for somebody that works entirely by themselves in their own home to reach out into their community and all the resources available. I'm really interested to know whether they actually don't know about the B&B network within NZ that is provided by BBANZ or whether they actually choose not to be involved and if they know what they are missing by not being involved. What you put into a group is what you get out of it. Some people that I know are members have a very light footprint. They just like to know they're connected to a professional body, they've met the standards and they don't demand or ask much of the Association but they probably absorb quite a bit of the information that I know you put onto Facebook and all the other pieces. Other people are really high users of the resources and network. I guess my interested would be to see that all hosted accommodation throughout the country talking together and making the most of what the Association offers and that voice that we have with TIA and all those other Government areas. We know from a member of ours that is very involved of MBIE that there are bucket loads of money spilling out of the Government at the moment to try and keep people engaged in what they do. We are all working for ourselves even though we don't get paid that well at times because it relies on our income but don't underestimate that you do work for yourself and there's lots of resources out there at a Government level. And for those non members that there is a wider network of hosted accommodation and they could be really benefiting from it.

My interested is why wouldn't you? Rather than why would you? Why wouldn't you?

That's interesting, and something for the board and for all members to work on ...

Every member I'm sure knows somebody that's not a member. And it would be interesting for that member to ask them, not to pressure them into being a member because that's not what it's about, but to say to get a different point of view – “why wouldn't you be?” rather than “why would you be?”. Have you ever considered it? And some people will say “no I didn't know they existed” and other people will say “we do our own thing”. How much could they add to their own thing by collaborating even on a local level? Lots of our local members in Wanaka don't always understand the big picture of B&B in NZ. We've just been lucky enough to have Donna come and sit in on our meeting yesterday. It was great that we had somebody other than me who trapes around and keeps in touch so they tend to pick up the phone and ask, but it was great to have a different face that's part of BBANZ. Yes, there's been a conference here and that gave them a glimpse of it but so many people either don't have time or resources or don't make it to conferences where you do see that big picture. That's not for everybody but it is certainly a great way to get a handle what other people are doing.

It's our members that shape our Association so for them to make even just one comment or have one interaction with us, that shapes the Association's direction.

I think the Association, in my observation, over the time 9-10 years that I've been involved, are now saying, and I like the way that Donna put it to our group yesterday, she said we're here to serve what you need. It's not us telling you what to do. You're telling us what you need and we're responding to that and I think that that really galvanised a lot of people yesterday to think here's a group I can go to when I'm in need. They know they can do that locally but there's a big wider network of people and I think not everybody thinks about it that way.

Liz, thank you for your time today.