

COUNTRY LIFE



Christi and Ken Eyerman opened the renovated Zane Trace Inn in Perry County in 2006 as a facility that specializes in women's retreats. The new venture and alternative income source gave Ken the opportunity to quit his full-time job in Columbus and focus more on custom farming.

Women's retreat facilities offer Eyerman opportunity to pursue farming

By Kyle Sharp

Ken Eyerman was born on a hog and crop farm in northern Pickaway County. Although his family got out of agriculture when he was still young, the childhood experience had a dramatic impact.

"All I ever wanted to do was farm, but my parents said, 'No,'" Ken said. "I had to be successful at something else first."

So after graduating from Teays Valley High School, where he met his future wife, Christi, he went off to Ohio State University in

Columbus and got a degree to become a broadcast engineer. He worked at WBNS Radio during school, and after graduating began a 20-year career at WBNS 10 TV in Columbus, eventually serving as chief engineer at the station.

In 1995, Ken, Christi and their two sons, Tyler and Cody, moved to a small, 32-acre farm near Somerset in Perry County, built a house, and three years later, Ken began doing some custom farming.

"I started farming on the side just because I wanted to do it," he said.

But when he took the chief engineer job at WBNS in 2004, the added commitment meant giving up farming.

"I had a big auction and sold everything but the combine and semi, because I thought I could do a little custom harvest work and keep a hand in it," Ken said.

It didn't take him long to realize he'd made the wrong decision and wasn't happy, so he began thinking of "an exit strategy" to live and work in the country. What evolved was a three-part plan that included expanding the custom farming operation, doing broadcast consulting work and developing a third, alternate income source. Oddly enough, the alternate opportunity that allowed Ken to pursue his farming dream turned out to be one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry — women's retreats, particularly photo scrapbooking.

"At first, we were interested in some sort of agritourism, but it just so happened that an old house came available in Somerset, and Christi's sister, Kathy Dorsey, is an avid scrapbooker, and she clued us in that those retreats took place. We didn't know," Ken said. "Maybe it was fate, but things just fell in place."

The Eyermans bought the 200-year-old house in 2006 and from Memorial Day through its opening in October oversaw the renovation of the old home into a modern, stylish women's retreat facility they dubbed the Zane Trace Inn. The complete renovation included a new roof, raised ceiling, refinished floors, additional bathrooms, a 1,200-square-foot addition to the back of the house, two new hot water tanks, single beds for the bedrooms, and a whole lot of paint and new wood trimming.

"We did a lot of research ahead of time and found the women who did these kinds of retreats didn't want to share beds, they wanted plenty of bathrooms and they didn't want to run out of hot water," Ken said.

Ken designed the remodeling effort, and Christi and a local painter came up with the painting and color schemes. The project was a large challenge.

"The crew doing the finished carpentry work took a month because nothing is plumb in an old house, and it's hard to make things fit and be level," Ken said. "Just like any old building, when you take off a layer you find more problems."

The local village government was supportive of the idea and the potential economic activity the new business could bring to the area. To help the cause, they renovated and paved an alley next to the Inn. In their advertising material, the Eyermans promote local artisans, specialty shops, restaurants, a scrapbooking shop, the area's historic homes and culture, area festivals, and other local attractions.

"We work a lot with local people and businesses," Ken said. "People don't just come and spend money with us, but other places too, and I think that's important."

Internet advertising enabled the new business to get the word out and build a healthy clientele from a much larger geography than was anticipated.

"We felt the majority of our business would be from Columbus, but more of the Ohio people tend to be from Cincinnati and Cleveland," Ken said. "And 40% are from outside Ohio. We've had women visit from Texas, South Dakota, Vermont, California, Florida and all surrounding states. I don't think a business like this would have thrived 20 years ago."

Hosting women's retreats offered a niche, and while scrapbooking groups have been their bread and butter, they also have hosted women's getaways focused on quilting, beading, spinning, faith focusing, family and friends. The success of the Zane Trace Inn convinced the Eyermans to convert their farmhouse into a second women's retreat facility called the Craft Farm, which opened this past October.

An owner's suite was built in the basement with a separate door in and out of the house. Ken and Christi stay there when the rest of the house is booked to guests. Their sons, now a college sophomore and a high school senior, live in an apartment built in the barn out back.

"We felt if we could book one or two groups a month at the Craft House it would be worth the time, effort and investment," Ken said. "But at the beginning of the year we had booked every weekend through March at both locations, and we have bookings into 2010 at both locations."

The Zane Trace Inn can host 12 guests and the Craft Farm 10 guests. There is no limit on minimum group size to book. There may be more than one group booked at a facility, but no one is ever asked to sleep in a room with someone they don't know, Ken said. Information on retreat packages is available at www.zanetraceinn.com or www.craftfarm.com, or by calling 740-743-9230.

When he's not booking rooms, doing maintenance, cooking "a mean pizza" for guests, marketing or doing other work for the retreat facilities, Ken finds time to do more of his first love — farming. Last year, he custom planted 850 acres of corn, side-dressed nitrogen on 1,100 acres and harvested about 1,000 acres. He also sells seed, chemicals and a product that puts starter fertilizer below the seed.

And while it's not agritourism, he does educate some guests about farming, if they are interested.

"We've given driving farm tours. We've had women who book at the farm and want to know if there are tractors," he said. "So if we can bridge the gap and provide some of the education to let people know what farming is all about, then we're all the better for it."