

Best Western Hotel, Walkerton

After more than 35 years of managing hotels across North America, Bonnie Petro has discovered that when it comes to owning and managing; there is no place like home.

Petro is the majority owner and Chief Operating Officer of the WERH Group, the investors behind the BEST WESTERN PLUS Walkerton East Ridge Hotel. But her career has taken her across North America from Sault Ste. Marie, Canada to Orlando, Florida.

“When I was in high school I was employed at the local Hartley House in Walkerton as a part-time food service,” Petro recalled. “At that time, the hotel was a five-star establishment owned and operated by the Schmalz Family. That introduced me to the hospitality industry.”

She relocated to Owen Sound where she joined the Holiday Inn Corporation as a front desk clerk. The Holiday Inn brand is now part of the InterContinental Hotels Group empire.

InterContinental's motto is 'hire to retire' and Petro embarked on a career that would take her across the continent for the next three decades.

“I managed several hotels – one being the largest Holiday Inn in North America – 650 guestrooms plus a convention centre on International Drive in Orlando,” Petro said.

“I resigned my general manager's position from the Inter Continental Corporation in February 2012 to return to my hometown – Walkerton, as the hotel developer owner/operator for BEST WESTERN PLUS Walkerton East Ridge Hotel.”

Located in the hub of the Grey and Bruce Counties area, the hotel attracts guests from around the world.

During the week, the hotel is supported by government and local corporate business. The area is rich with agricultural demands for product sales people and construction projects, Petro explained.

On weekends, the hotel is filled with guests affiliated with sports teams and those who enjoy outdoor recreation including snowmobilers in the winter. The hotel is also used by people for special occasions, she said.

Since opening in May 2012, the hotel has attracted an average of 14,000 guests a year. Guests also spend money at local gas stations, pharmacies, restaurants and stores; providing an economic boost to the whole area.

The economic spin-off benefits from the hotel are expected to multiply when an accompanying convention centre, which broke ground in April 2015, is finished.

But while Petro brings more than 30 years of hotel management experience to the hotel and convention centre as well as a healthy dose of passion for the business, she's quick to point out that getting the projects this far has been a community effort.

“You've heard the proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child,’” she said. “In my words, it takes a village to build a hotel.”

“The most important goal for the WERH Group Inc. - the shareholders – was to buy local and hire local tradespeople. The community has an abundance of outstanding professional skilled tradespeople who care and are proud of their service.”

B & G Fine Furniture of Walkerton designed and built the hotel's guest room furnishings along with bathroom vanities by Johnson Woodworks. Other local companies involved in the project include B Folmer's landscaping, RKS Electrical, Cuneo Interiors Carpet, Tile & Paint.

The hotel couldn't have been built without the support of the community and the hard work of several individuals including Casey Scherders, John Ernewein, Joe Heisz and Mike McIntee, she said.

The service team has done exemplary work to help boost the hotel's reputation. The team of 14 staff members have won 21 awards since the May 2012 opening, including the prestigious Best Western International M.K Guertin award for the past two years and was voted as one of the top 10 hotels in Canada for quality and service on Trip Advisor by the guests. Guertin was the founder of the Best Western hotel chain.

In addition to shareholders, the project received financial backing from the Saugeen Economic Development Corporation.

“The heavy lifting of the financing took four years,” Petro said. “It was very challenging during the recession of 2008 to move forward.”

“Our success has been 100% funded by local residents and the Saugeen Economic Development Corporation – people who invest in their community and invested in a shared vision.”

Petro is grateful for the years she spent with the InterContinental Hotels Group.

“They are world leaders in the hospitality industry who provide a culture to grow to be successful,” Petro said. “But when it comes to building and managing your own hotel and providing a service to the local communities... there really is no place like home.”