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World traveler boosts tourism in hometown of Wilson



Michelle Evans, who owns the Sunset Bar and Grill and Wilson Boat House with her husband, takes a break at the marina they also own on Monday. Robert Kirkham/
Buffalo News

WILSON – While happy growing up in idyllic Wilson, Michelle “Shelly” Elia and Dan Evans nonetheless dreamed of seeing the world before they settled down wherever life would lead.

But it turns out that life led them right back to this quaint lakeside community.

The couple met in high school, married in 2010, and now, in their early 30s, are working hard to boost tourism in their hometown. In 2009 they took over the **Wilson Boat House** – a business they continue to own, on property they lease. In 2010 they leased the **Sunset Bar and Grill** across the harbor, which they then purchased last October along with the 26-acre marina.

Dan started **Lone Wolf Sport Fishing** in 2009, offering year-round fishing charter and guide services, and the couple started Chopped Lovin’, a deer-processing business, in 2012 out of the garage of their Wilson home.

And, the couple will be even busier in the future.

They hope to begin construction this fall on an addition to the Sunset Grill, adding a 300-seat banquet hall to open in 2017.

And, they formed **Lake Ontario Bootlegging LLC** in December 2013, and have started the federal permit process, with licensing expected by the end of the year. **They plan to distill vodka, gin, rye whiskey and bourbon, using local products.**

And did we mention they still like to travel the world in their free time?

What free time?

With a few precious minutes left last week before the tourism season swung into full gear, Shelly some time to talk about their past, present and future.

Let’s start at the beginning – so you and your husband grew up in Wilson?

We met at Wilson High School. I received my bachelor's in general studies from the University of Dayton, but I knew by junior year I wanted to be a chef and went to Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts, then did an internship in Casperia (outside of Rome) and worked for a while at **Carmelo's** in Lewiston. Dan earned his degree in education at Niagara University.

Dan had been hunting and fishing forever, so we applied to a number of places out West and worked at an elk-hunting lodge in Gunniston, Colo., for a season. I was the chef and he was a guide. In fact, that's where he proposed to me. We thought we'd travel and see the world, and I'd get jobs as a chef and he'd be a guide or mate as we travelled. But then, my Dad (Michael Elia) called and said there was this opportunity to lease the Wilson Boat House, so we came back to Western New York. It's been wonderful. I've always loved this area. I'm very close to my family, and my parents, Michael and Karin and my brother, Michael, have helped out with the marina, and both of my sisters, Jennifer and Jessica Elia, have also helped with decorating and logos and will continue to help.

So, you took over the Wilson Boat House in 2009?

I hired the previous manager, **Chuck Mercurio**, as kind of a mentor, to help with it. He also helped me get the Sunset Grill started and, in fact, I just hired him to manage the Sunset Grill. With outside seating, we seat about 210 at the Wilson Boat House. It's open mid-April to mid-September, seven days a week, for lunch and dinner, with live music Thursday through Sunday. It has a separate lunch and dinner menu and the dinner is a little higher-end. I'd call it casual/fine dining.

The Sunset Grill is casual dining and a little more laid back. We added an outside bar and we're extending our outside patio right now and will seat close to 200 altogether, inside and out. There's one menu served all day, with live music Wednesday and Sunday.

It's seasonal, too, and open seven days a week now. It's open for dinner Monday through Thursday and opens at 2 p.m. Friday and Saturday and noon on Sunday.

With two restaurants, why did you decide to pursue a new banquet hall?

We get phone calls all of the time, for weddings and showers, but you can only accommodate so many here at the restaurants. This made sense.

Tell us about the new marina.

It's the old Sunset Marina and we call it Bootleggers Cove Marina. It has 170 slips, 30-ton in/out service, inside storage (26,000 square feet) and outside storage (10 acres), and a full-service store. My husband and I will run it.

He had worked as a first mate on charters when he was a teenager and started his own charter business when we moved back here. He still has his charter business, but when he's busy at the marina, his first mate will operate the charters.

It's really a year-round business because when people store their boats here, we're responsible for them. Boating is, of course, weather-dependent. Usually they put in around mid-April and haul out after Labor Day, with the last boats out by around mid-November.

How did you decide to add a distillery?

My husband took a liking to the idea. He'll be the distiller. *We both drink bourbon. It made sense with everything else going on around here, like the wineries and the breweries.*

We're using a hangar that was built in the 1940s – a Quonset hut – at the marina for the distillery. I'll be a part of it, but this will mainly be my husband's. He wants to take it all on. With the equipment we're purchasing, we'll be able to do it all.

With all of these businesses, do you miss cooking?

I still do a lot of cooking at home and I enjoy it.

When?

In the winter (with a laugh).

When do you get to travel?

In the winter. We went to Asia this past winter and South Africa the winter before. Traveling is my second passion.

How long are your work days when your businesses are in full gear? Fourteen-hour days, sometimes more. But my husband will come and see me at the restaurant and we try and take a day off when we can. We both love what we do, so it doesn't feel like working. I absolutely enjoy myself and the support from my husband and my family made this all happen.