

Guest Column: The Faces of Hospitality & Tourism

As you are probably aware, tourism is a top economic driver for San Juan County. Visitors “import” new dollars, which benefit small businesses, non-profits like museums and farmers markets, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island communities. This series of columns will help put faces to this industry – restauranteurs, innkeepers, shopkeepers, tour captains, and other entrepreneurs who make our communities so unique and vibrant.

Robert Harrison grew up in the Islands and couldn’t wait to leave when he turned 18. As he traveled and lived around the globe – including walking the Camino de Santiago three times – he came to really appreciate the islands and how special they are. When it came time to put down roots, he knew that he wanted to be on Lopez. As he says, “I like the freedom of living out here and the small-town feel, knowing my neighbors and being a part of the community.”

Robert was fourteen when he got into photography and hasn’t stopped since—“Once I picked up a camera, I was immediately drawn to photographing people; finding ways to capture moments, expressions, joys and, in my own way, create a vision of life.” As a photographer, Robert enjoys introducing people to the islands. Most of his clients come to the islands for low-key weddings, sweet family photo sessions or just to get away for a bit. “They really just want to have a nice relaxing time, and it is great to be a part of it!” He also finds inspiration from other photographers like Kristin Rehder and her photography series “TREMOR: Reflections on the Nature of Parkinson’s” that will be displayed this summer on Lopez.

How does tourism benefit the Islands?

“I think most islanders start out as tourists, I know that my family did in the early 1990s. I think the islands touch certain people when they come here to visit and then they decided to make the islands their home.”

Much like others have said in this series, the ferries following the COVID pandemic have been Robert’s biggest challenge—trying to get from Lopez to other islands for gigs—“There was one summer when I was constantly needing to ask friends and family members for rides on their boats to get to weddings.” This sense of community—helping out our neighbors—has led us through uncharted waters before and will get us through again.