

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 and sales tax, which benefit small businesses, non-profits like museums and farmers markets, government programs, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island communities. This series of columns will help put faces to the hospitality industry – restauranteurs, innkeepers, shopkeepers, tour captains, and other entrepreneurs who make our communities so unique and vibrant.

When an opportunity arose to take over a kayaking operation in Friday Harbor, Cole Wilson didn’t just dip a toe in the water – he dove in headfirst. He had worked for the previous owners of San Juan Kayak Expeditions, and as they transitioned into retirement, everything fell into place. As he says, “I have learned so much throughout the process and I wouldn’t change it for the world. I love being part of a small, inclusive, supportive and collaborative community in paradise! Being surrounded by snow-covered mountains and water is truly magical.” His favorite part of working with visitors is getting to facilitate novel, life-changing experiences and educating people about the importance of responsible recreation and the impact that we have on local environments.

How does tourism benefit the Islands?

“I think that so many local organizations do an amazing job of educating visitors on the ecological effects that humans can have and ways to minimize impact. This is very empowering and can inspire change that benefits so many communities all around the globe. I think it is important to be aware of the impact of local business on our community members and fragile ecosystem.” He joined the Visitors Bureau because he was eager to hear about the successes and challenges of other business owners and how they deal with them.

As the Islands’ business community continues to navigate the challenges presented by the ferries and other economic issues, Cole has a few words of advice for other new owners and entrepreneurs, “Adaptability and flexibility are mandatory! Toss your ego out the window and prioritize customer service. View every situation from as many different perspectives as possible.”

Cole loves providing a cool job for his employees in an amazing community in a beautiful place, and believes that with that comes the responsibility to develop “soft” skills that are going to create future opportunities and help folks be better employees no matter where they end up. One of his goals moving forward is to bridge the gap between commercial kayak companies and the local community. He wants to provide education, safety and inspiration and get more local community members out on the water, perhaps through creating a

paddle club or other events. This sense of community—connecting with our neighbors—has led us through uncharted waters before and will get us through again.