

Wild Annie's: A Wild Ride

Written by Codi Brown

Anne Marie Hollinshead, a Washington state native, had always dreamed about owning and operating her own restaurant. When Anne Marie was a senior in high school, her family moved from Washington to California. Soon after she met her now-husband Eric, an active-duty Marine at the time, and followed him back to his little hometown of Harrisonville, Pennsylvania. They married in 1990 and soon after Anne Marie began running a successful catering business as a stay-at-home mom to their two children, but the dream of owning a restaurant was always in the back of her mind.

After their children were grown up and in high school, Anne Marie and Eric decided to make the leap from catering to a food concession trailer to determine if they could first build a clientele base for a future restaurant. The first hurdle that lay ahead was getting approved for a loan. The first bank that the Hollinsheads approached for a loan turned them away. After searching around, a second bank approved them for a loan and Anne Marie and Eric bought an 8x24-foot food concessions trailer.

The next hurdle that they had to overcome was finding a location for the trailer. The Hollinsheads had decided that they did not want to pack up the trailer and travel to different festivals, but instead find a more permanent locale to start their business. After searching for a suitable location to no avail, they were eventually approached and offered a section in the parking lot of another local business along Main Street in McConnellsburg, Pennsylvania.

Officially opening for business in April of 2013, Wild Annie's was no longer a dream, but instead a reality. As with any business, the first year was unpredictable. Initially, breakfast was served, but business was so slow at that time that eventually Anne Marie began focusing on lunch and dinner. With no advertisement for the new business, as Anne Marie believed that her

success needed to be built on a reputation of great food, the food trailer regularly saw busy lunches and even busier dinners. Boasting its own unique menu, Anne Marie had created the wide variety of food items from scratch. With five or more workers crammed into a little food trailer and business booming, it was evident that Anne Marie had successfully built her reputation and developed a solid clientele base. It was time to finally open her very own restaurant.

In September of 2018, after five years of serving the community, the Hollinsheads closed and sold the food trailer. Again, the search for a new location began. After looking at local existing buildings, they were still not happy. Nothing that they had seen had satisfied the image of the restaurant that she had envisioned. So, the couple made the decision to design their own building to their specifications. Their son approached them with eight acres of land that he found on the outskirts of McConnellsburg, and the deal was sealed.

Using the money from selling the food trailer as their down payment, the Hollinsheads went to their bank for a loan after developing a business plan. The bank refused to finance the restaurant as the business plan they had submitted stated they would be closed on Sundays. Bank officials told Anne Marie and Eric that a restaurant of the magnitude they were planning could never survive being open only six days a week in such a rural area. Being very family- and faith-oriented, the Hollinsheads knew that this was one aspect that they would not compromise on. A search began for another bank that would grant them a loan. Finally, the third bank they approached on their Wild Annie's journey gave them approval and construction on the restaurant began.

With the prior success of the food trailer coming from the support of the local community, Anne Marie deeply felt the need to do her part and give back. Community

contractors and subcontractors were used exclusively while building the restaurant. R.H. Bunch Construction headed the project, while several other subcontractors contributed their handiwork to additions such as the stone fireplace and the metal bathroom stalls.

What should have taken only ten months to build took well over two years. First, issues with the onsite drainage pond arose. This setback alone added six months to the project and an additional \$10,000. Next was the nationwide shutdown due to COVID-19, which delayed the project an additional eight weeks as it was nearing completion. Finally, opening day came closer and closer to being a reality. All of the restaurant furniture and kitchen equipment had been delivered, as well as enough food for a highly anticipated opening weekend. With \$3,000 of food waiting to be sold and two days until opening day, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) shut the restaurant down. The well that had been drilled for the restaurant's water supply was not approved due to paperwork filing issues.

With the support of state senators and local representatives, Anne Marie rallied against DEP. After coming this far, she was told to give up her dream. She would never be able to open her restaurant that she put her entire life into bringing to fruition. With an unapproved water supply, the restaurant was going to be shut down and condemned. Only two more options were available: install a filtration system that would require another six to eight months, a separate building to house the system, and another \$70,000-80,000; or redrill a new well for \$30,000. The only way to pass the well test and get approved to open by DEP was to get an absolutely perfect water test.

Anne Marie and Eric made the difficult decision to redrill a new well. She sat on an upside-down plastic five-gallon bucket for days watching them drill the new well and praying over it. Her entire life dream lay on this well. After its completion, she again sat for another six

hours while DEP conducted a well pump test. The test was submitted for analysis, and an antagonizing four days later, the results arrived. The water was perfect, what Anne Marie called “Jesus water.” The restaurant was given the green light to open. God had answered her prayers.

With the restaurant now operational, even more roadblocks lay ahead. COVID-19 had broken down the entire restaurant supply chain, making it difficult to get ingredient, supplies, and equipment. Orders were delayed and instead of relying on one wholesale company, the Hollinsheads now had to use many. On top of these difficulties, the restaurant could open at only twenty-five percent capacity.

Despite the many on her journey, Anne Marie succeeded. The first day Wild Annie’s officially opened for business, there was an hour and a half wait for seating. Take-out orders were filling the kitchen. Anne Marie’s reputation that had been built in her tiny food trailer helped the restaurant survive despite many other local businesses closing amid the pandemic.

From the very beginning, many obstacles lay in the way of making Wild Annie’s a reality, but the faith and determination of Anne Marie and Eric Hollinshead allowed them to persevere and see their dream come true. Backed by a lifetime of planning with Anne Marie creating all of the unique menu items from scratch, and Eric chatting with patrons in the laid-back dining room atmosphere, it’s no wonder that Wild Annie’s grew into one of the most popular local restaurants.

(All information found in this essay was obtained through personal interviews and used with permission from Eric and Anne Marie Hollinshead, owners of Wild Annie’s restaurant in McConnellsburg, PA.)