

J's Place: Soft Serve and Smiles

It seems fitting that there is a place located just 15 minutes northeast of Norfolk in Pierce, Nebraska called J's Place. After all, Pierce Public School is the home of the Bluejays. Their school colors are also blue which is coincidentally the same color seen throughout J's. However, this classic ice cream shop and hamburger joint is named after the owner's mother, Judie, and incorporates her favorite color, blue.

J's is located at the corner of Mill and Main in a building that has been in the community for around 100 years. In the 1920s it was a gas station. It turned into a food establishment in the 1960s with a dining area added in 1964 and most recently updated and added onto in 2015.

J's owner, Wanda Backus, opened in 2016, but the origins date much further. Wanda grew up on a dairy farm near Dodge, Nebraska where she worked alongside her parents and five brothers. Eventually, during her senior year of high school, her father purchased the local ice cream shop in Dodge, which they renamed the Dodge Snack Shop.

She spent her senior year working at the shop and learning all about the ice cream business. However, when it came time to graduate, she wasn't interested in continuing her work there, so she went on to school at Northeast Community College in Norfolk and also Wayne State College in Wayne.

She graduated with a teaching degree and then taught for several years. Several jobs led her to move to Norfolk and then Pierce where she eventually worked in the Pierce County Assessor's office. It was there that her current business opportunity was laid right in front of her.

While living in Pierce, Backus had always eyed the restaurant, known then as the Short Stop Inn, and thought it held great potential for her.

"I knew from the get-go how awesome of a place it was and what I could do with it," said Backus.

Fate pointed her toward that very idea when she took a call at the Assessor's office from the realtor looking for information about the property in preparation to list the restaurant for sale. Backus jumped at the opportunity and hasn't looked back since.

"I was the first one the realtor called the night before they put it on the market, so I grabbed at the opportunity and bought it."

After extensive renovations and other preparations, she was ready to open. Her goal was to offer the community and surrounding area a family-friendly, relaxed place to enjoy a good meal or dessert with the good old-fashioned atmosphere of a local ice cream shop.

Since opening, she has welcomed adults and children of all ages to come and select from chocolate, vanilla or twist soft serve ice cream and a variety of over 40 different toppings to create custom dessert combinations. From waffle cones, sno-cones, parfaits, malts, shakes, slushies, fried ice cream, ice cream bars and sandwiches, banana boats, whirlwinds and the famous “Pierce Pounder,” there is a treat for every taste.

“A lot of the ice cream dessert items we offer, I make myself including waffle cones, brownie and churro bowls, fried ice cream, chocolate covered bananas and cookie sandwiches.”

And the delicious tastes don't stop with dessert! J's offers a full menu of burgers, sandwiches and sides—from staples such as the fresh, never frozen bacon cheeseburger, BLT, chicken strips and swiss mushroom burger, to seasonal items such as the BBQ pork sandwich, patty melt, and Rubeen sandwich, to their always popular deep-fried Cheese Frenchee using the famous King's restaurant recipe.

J's is also open for breakfast on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Popular breakfast items include omelets, biscuits and gravy, French toast and pancakes, and cinnamon rolls.

Backus also points out that they take orders for a wide-variety of specially made cream cheese mints and Christmas cookies. A host of different mint flavors and shapes can be special ordered for events and special occasions.

J's relies heavily on local students to help staff the business, so their hours vary throughout the year depending on school schedules. However, she is grateful for their willingness to work and support the family-friendly atmosphere.

She has really seen this attitude of fun and friendliness flourish as they offer the “Pierce Pounder” challenge. The

Pierce Pounder consists of a pound of ice cream atop a chocolate chip cookie or brownie with 3-5 ice cream toppings and a cherry added on top. The challenge is that anyone who can eat the entire sundae in any amount of time and keep it down within five minutes of finishing, gets their picture taken and placed on their special wall. Backus says they've had over 65 people complete the challenge so far, and many more that have attempted.

For Backus, owning and running the shop fits her personality perfectly as she is always eager to meet new people, talk with customers and get to know them even for just a little while. She has witnessed the positive effect offering this type of business has for her patrons.

“One thing I love most is seeing the way it makes a child's or adult's eyes dance when you hand them their ice cream. It's that joy and spark that is really neat. I think the kid in all of us loves ice cream and the fun that comes with the ability to create our own unique treat.”

Backus is always looking for new ways to help keep things fun and bring something new to her customers—such as adding Sunday breakfast, participating in the Nebraska Passport tourism program, or promotions

where the 2,019th cone ordered is free. She is now also offering customers the option to sign up online to receive discounts and birthday specials, which includes a free special sundae on your birthday.

Her hope is that she can continue to offer the homey and comfortable atmosphere of the old-time ice cream parlor of yesteryear—where a good meal or treat can be warmly shared together with family and friends.

