

A marriage that works

Couple converts Troutdale House to wedding center

BY SHANNON WELLS

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She may not have realized it at the time, but Laura Burlus found her career calling at a tender age. Her experience as a flower girl at her sister's wedding started a lifelong love of the matrimonial event.

"I liked the fact that it was this huge party," she said, "and it was fun to see everybody treat the bride and groom like royalty. They were like king and queen of the royal court for a day. That's how I viewed it back then."

Burlus is channeling her passion for pomp, circumstance and experiences to remember into a new business in downtown Troutdale. She and Martin Burlus, her husband of 13 years, have converted the former Liberator Brewing site at 411 E. Historic Columbia River Highway into a wedding, event and conference center.

"This has been a dream of mine since I was 9," she said.

The Troutdale House by the Sandy River transforms what was once a vegetable packing house by the railroad tracks into a rustic, yet elegant three-level hospitality emporium. With 14 weddings already scheduled through November, Burlus is looking forward to a grand opening ceremony at 6 p.m. Thursday, May 1. With only minor work and adjustments to be made, however, Troutdale House should be ready for business by mid-April.

So far, most of the bookings are from East County-based customers.

"People want to stay close to their homes," she said, adding that she and Martin are moving from Seattle to a townhouse a block away to be hands-on business owners. "People seem excited to have a place like this on the east side."

Junki Yoshida, owner of Yoshida Foods and Riverview Restaurant and the former owner of an art gallery at the same location, said he was impressed with the couple's plan and believes it will fill a crucial niche.

"They're going to be very successful, depending on how many people find out about it," he said. "In the Gresham area, it's very difficult to find an indoor area to accommodate 150 to 200 people."

"They're wonderful people. I'd really like to see them succeed," he said.

The long, cavernous main room accommodates up to 200 people. Graced with dark hardwood floors sprouting support posts to the wood-paneled ceiling, the many-windowed room features a long bar and plenty of tables and chairs for wedding guests and businesspeople.

"It's structured for weddings," Laura Burlus said, "but it can be for anything."

The second floor provides plenty of space in a well-appointed bride's lounge and dressing room. The more casual basement houses a groom's area, a second bar and recreational amenities including a pool table and foosball table. The different shapes and sizes of the basement rooms make it appealing for



JOHN KLICKER / THE OUTLOOK

Portland native Laura Burlus shows off the refurbished interior of The Troutdale House by the Sandy River. She will run the business with her photographer husband, Martin. The couple will renew their wedding vows at the May 1 grand opening ceremony.

smaller meetings and visual presentations using projection and PowerPoint, Burlus said.

There's plenty of eye candy for guests to take in. A mural painted years ago by Amanda Yoshida, whose father is Junki Yoshida, is a fascinating collage of iconic figures and images. A cabinet in one nook contains items such as a vintage phonograph, an arch-shaped wooden radio, antique cameras and a 1960s-era dial table phone.

Burlus, 33, said the collection of artifacts are designed to stimulate conversation among diverse groups.

"Any generation can have something to talk about," she said.

The concept of a self-contained wedding hall, where the ceremony and reception are held under one roof, has its advantages, she said. Keeping the wedding party together is a big one.

"You can lose half your party when it's in two different places," she said of the travel between locations. "It's a waste of food."

The Troutdale House doesn't offer on-site catering, but a sizable kitchen with a commercial range is available for outside vendors to use. Sprucing up the kitchen was one of numerous renovations Laura and her husband had to tackle to make the building, vacant since 2005, usable for events. They overhauled wiring, plumbing and heating and cooling systems and installed a sprinkler system to keep up with local fire codes.

A business novice, Burlus admits she found the project daunting at times. She credits her father, Ray Bailey, with offering endless moral, as well as labor, support.

"He's been assisting, painting, helping in all kinds of ways," she said. "He's given some business advice, mostly how to deal with people."

Now that opening days are in view, she sees the challenges along the way as a labor of love – literally. She and Martin will renew their wedding vows as part of the May 1 Grand Opening celebration, which will also have Troutdale Mayor Paul Thalhoffer on hand for a ribbon cutting.

"It just feels so simple. It feels more like fun than work," she said. "That's how you know you're doing what you really love – when it's not like work."