

Olivia Stewart, Jessica Fahrenthold and Abby Jurgensmeier ham it up for the camera while making their ice cream favorites.



Fountain of Youth

PHOTOS BY HEIDI TRAUTMAN

The aroma of homemade waffle cones and freshly baked brownies linger and mingle with the sweet smell of ice cream confections. The ceremonial slam of the screen door transports you to 1912 in Bennington, when the building was built, originally housing a pharmacy and now home to The Linger Longer soda fountain.

The atmosphere captivates the young in spirit, with pingpong, foosball, checkers and pinball machines awaiting action in the back game room and antique memorabilia nestled throughout. Dr. Pepper collectible antiques—the second largest on display in the world—are a fun feast for the eyes, with the main course a sea foam green soda pop vending machine flanking its mannequin sidekick dressed in Dr. Pepper garb. Good luck finding Coke memorabilia—there’s only one item hidden amongst the treasures. Children search for it as part of a store scavenger hunt created by the youthful soda jerks who work there.

Sharolyn Wagner and her husband, Jay, members of DS&O Electric Cooperative, opened The Linger Longer as a way to give back to the Bennington community. “Community has always been very important to my husband and me. We believe that you need to give back to your community and there are a myriad ways to do that,” Sharolyn said. “I’ve always volunteered so this is my volunteer project now. All we want to do is make enough to replace the pingpong balls because they go everywhere,” she joked.

Sharolyn, who playfully refers to herself as the “Biggest Jerk,” employs six to nine soda jerks throughout the year, most of whom attend high school in the area or will begin college this fall. Wagner says that although these are entry-level jobs, her goal for the workers goes beyond a paycheck.

“Hopefully they could run a small business after working here for a few years. That would be my aim,” she said. Sharolyn’s commitment to mentoring youth stems from

her previous job at Hallmark Cards where she worked with entry-level employees, many who didn’t have prior job experience.

“The ones who worked as youth were better employees. They knew to show up on time, how to present themselves for a job, how to talk to the public, and they could problem solve,” she explained. “I think it’s important for business owners to invest in our youth by preparing them because many don’t know what it is to be an employee.”

From the first day on the job at The Linger Longer, the soda jerks begin learning different aspects of the business, from cleaning to cooking, and eventually inventory and product pricing. All of these duties Sharolyn believes are important for employees to understand the “whys” of her decisions.

“I try to explain to them from the standpoint of when you make business decisions you have to look at the bottom line. It helps everyone to understand how much money we are making and what things cost. The more they understand, the more they understand why I expect them to be busy and working while they are here.”

The employees, in turn, share their ideas and opinions with Sharolyn, and she’s eager to try their ideas. “If they find a better way of doing something and want to change, I will try it,” Sharolyn explained. “I tell them or they tell me, ‘I think we need to do this.’”



Sharolyn Wagner, owner of The Linger Longer in Bennington, has the second-largest display of Dr. Pepper collectible antiques in the world.

Case in point is the Brownie Shake, a concoction invented on the spur of the moment by soda jerk Abby Jurgensmeier when a friend’s brother ordered one earlier this summer. “It wasn’t something we had on the menu so I created it. Sharolyn tasted it and really liked it so she added it to the menu,” Abby shared.

From inventing menu items to helping determine menu prices, Sharolyn appreciates her employees’ initiative and drive, and encourages their input.

“Chances are they won’t make a mistake I haven’t made already! And I’m messy!” to which Abby quickly chimed in. “She is the messiest of all of us!” with both of them laughing in agreement.

Children who visit The Linger Longer look up to the youthful soda jerks and anticipate the day they might be able to work there. “The younger kids are always asking, ‘how old do you have to be to be a soda jerk?’” Sharolyn shared.

In addition to having good grades, Sharolyn looks for additional traits in prospective employees that she believes to be just as important. “They must be honest and ethical, and I want them to be leaders,” she noted.

With an undergraduate degree in elementary education, Sharolyn has always enjoyed working with children and welcomes spending time with the youthful soda jerks. “I have great employees—they are awesome! They’re fun, they’re lively, and their friends come in and bring a life and enthusiasm to the business.”

The admiration is mutual, and the employees appreciate the opportunity to learn while enjoying what they do.

“It’s unique working here,” Abby said. “We make all the food, clean, bake—everything. And how many people can say they worked at an old-fashioned soda fountain or even know what a soda jerk is?” **KCL**

Learn more about The Linger Longer at www.thelingerlonger.com.



Linger Longer soda jerks pose with their favorite ice cream treats: Leslie Swagerty, Michaelyn Laflen, Olivia Stewart, Abby Jurgensmeier and Jessica Fahrenthold. Not pictured: Zach Everhart.

MEET THE ‘JERKS’

JESSICA FAHRENTHOLD

▶ “I really like to meet all the different people. We’ve had customers from Canada and South Africa.”

▶ **Favorite Fountain Treat:** Turtle Sundae with Strawberry Ice Cream “because I really like our strawberry ice cream.”

MICHAELYN LAFLEN

▶ “I like putting on the whipped cream and making everything look pretty. I love it.”

▶ **Favorite Fountain Treat:** Hot Fudge Butterscotch Brownie Sundae. “The Brownies are so good here, and that’s my favorite part. And we warm them up before adding them to the sundae.”

ABBY JURGENSMEIER

▶ “I like playing the player piano because my great-grandma used to play piano a lot and it’s a good memory of her.”

▶ **Favorite Fountain Treat:** The Brownie Shake, “because I invented it!”

OLIVIA STEWART

▶ “I love doing the whipped cream, and I like the people because we have fun.”

▶ **Favorite Fountain Treat:** Very Berry Shake “because I love fruity stuff.”

LESLIE SWAGERTY

▶ “Every day I learn something new. I also like it when customers try something new and say, ‘Oh that’s so good.’”

▶ **Favorite Fountain Treat:** Triple Chocolate Shake, “because it’s not too chocolatey, but chocolatey enough.”