



‘Leap Of Faith’ Leads To Awesome Life For Philadelphia/West Chester KOA’s Levesque Family

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KOA NEWS SERVICE (June 13, 2016) – Gary and Lori Levesque traded in their two-story home, white picket fence and jobs in the corporate workforce for a campground and a couple of yellow shirts 25 years ago, and have never looked back.

Newly married with a growing family, the Levesques took a leap of faith when they decided to leave their jobs in St. Louis, Mo., to purchase the Philadelphia/ West Chester KOA Holiday with Gary’s parents.

“Trust me, it was a huge leap,” said Gary. “But it was the right time.”

The Levesques first looked at campgrounds in Florida before deciding on the Philadelphia/ West Chester campground. When they arrived at the campground, the Levesques had a two-year-old son and three-week-old daughter. One more daughter would follow.

“That was the most awesome part of this whole thing,” said Lori. “Our children got to live an awesome life. We raised them outside of day care. Gary got to be the dad on field trips.

“Back when I was in the corporate world, I remember getting a call from Gary saying, ‘You forgot to pick up Ryan. You’ve got to get your priorities straight.’

We had everything, but a really unfulfilled life.”

Owning a KOA campground allowed Gary and Lori to foster their entrepreneurial spirits by working and raising a family at the same time.

“I got the best of both worlds. I got to do advertising, shopping for the camp store, landscaping, I got to do all kinds of businesses and still be a mom,” said Lori.

While all three of the children have graduated college and are pursuing careers outside the campground, Lori said she hasn’t heard a total “no” yet, and says time will tell if future generations will run the campground.

For now, the Levesques run the campground on their own, buying out Gary’s parents some time ago. The couple has continued to improve camper’s experiences through renovated sites, the addition of cabins and added activities.

“We try to gear activity toward pulling people together and away from their electronics and stressful lives,” said Lori. “People are so inside of themselves with work and stress that when they come here we want them to reconnect with one another.”

If getting people to connect means changing things up, the Levesques aren’t afraid to do so.

“I used to have this band come out and it would sit out on the stage and play, but it wasn’t connecting people in the way I wanted it to,” said Lori. “I went in a different direction and found a local entertainment company to come out. We brought in caricature artists, balloon sculptors and jugglers.”

Other activities include a visit from the Philadelphia Zoo, and a very popular rocket launcher activity on the recommendation of the San Diego Metro KOA.

“It was the first time we got dads to participate in a craft,” said Lori.

Gary said other big draws for the campground have been a gem mining station and a flashlight lollipop hunt.

“It’s amazing to see how enthralled kids are by rocks,” chuckled Gary. “And when parents ask kids where they want to go

camping, they'll respond with the lollipop hunt place. It's a half-hour activity, but the kids love it."

The couple also built a 4,000-square-foot building called the Liberty Lodge, which they say comes in especially handy during the off season. During the month of October, the Liberty Lodge is host to large dances and parties, as well as pumpkin painting and hay rides outside. The building also houses ice-cream socials and pancake breakfasts. This guarantees activities rain or shine.

Reflecting on 25 years, the couple says belonging to the KOA franchise has provided invaluable information and benefits.

"When we hear about other owners who aren't really participatory, we don't really understand," said Lori. "It's a huge benefit being a part of the KOA system. We have all the extra staff on hand to foresee things coming down the pipe in terms of business and the camping industry. We also love our KOA 20 group. It is filled with movers and shakers and it's neat to visit one another's campgrounds."

Speaking on the camping industry and economic trends, Gary said he has seen a shift in the way campers travel since the economic trouble in 2008.

"When we started we had a high number of tourists who visited our campground. We sold tons of souvenirs. Over the years, that has changed to a very large local crowd. After everything in 2008 we didn't see the people from across the country anymore. We see people who own campers and want to use them, but maybe only want to get away for the weekend and stick close to home."

Perhaps one of the most important lessons the Levesques have learned over their 25 years as KOA campground owners is that it's never too late to take that leap of faith.

"You don't have to be stuck doing something you're not happy doing," said Lori. "You can pursue other avenues."

"After all these years we can't see ourselves doing anything else. This is what we do best."

Find out more about the Philadelphia/West Chester KOA Holiday by visiting <http://koa.com/campgrounds/philadelphia/>.