



## **Starting A Business In Vermont - Being An Innkeeper** **Bill Vines and Mary Furlong, Birch Ridge Inn at Killington** *By Royal Barnard of The Mountain Times*

Vermont has always been an attractive place to live. As the world has become more complicated, there have been an increasing number of people who are buying second homes here, finding new jobs here, or opening new businesses. The rewards of owning your own business in Vermont are many, but there are also some common pitfalls that one should avoid.

Prior to purchasing The Mountain Times, I spent some time in commercial real estate. My job involved traveling around the state to list, show and sell business properties. Most of what I saw were failed enterprises... owned by persons who came to Vermont with too many "stars in their eyes," too few dollars in their pockets, and no realistic plans. There are, however, many examples of people who have made the move to Vermont, and done so successfully.

Bill Vines and his partner, Mary Furlong, were both comfortable corporate executives in the Boston area. Bill worked in International Marketing for Motorola, and Mary was a Quality Engineer for Ocean Spray. Both Bill and Mary earned good incomes, but spent more time than they liked in airplanes, hotels and restaurants.

Their "escape" began with joining a ski house in Killington, followed by buying a second home in Killington, and ultimately deciding that they wanted permanent residence here.

In the winter of 1996, Bill and Mary got serious about a move and began brainstorming about what they might be able to do in Killington to make a living. They conjured up 100 or more ideas, which they ultimately reduced to four or five, and eventually to one - owning an inn. Although they had no innkeeping experience, both had spent A LOT of time in hotels and restaurants and had met many interesting people... something they thought they'd enjoy doing as entrepreneurs instead of travelers.

This is where the story really begins, because there's no shortage of people that get to this step, but fail to follow through successfully. From the beginning, Bill and Mary treated the move as a business project - trying to leave their "heart" out of picture when making important decisions.



The first move for them was to learn about the business of innkeeping. To do that, they spoke with 50-60 innkeepers at 40 or so inns around the state of Vermont. With the sage advice they received, they chose a concept for their proposed operation that filled a need they perceived within the hospitality market, yet also suited their personal goals. Next, they took on the task of preparing a business plan, locating a property to suit the plan, developing a budget, consulting with experts who could review their plan and give it the "OK," and begin the process of securing financing for the project. In May of 1997, Bill and Mary made a contract on a former executive retreat property located just off the Killington Road.

Before a loan could be received from the bank, it was necessary to secure an Act 250 permit, local zoning approval and quotes for structural improvements. This process lasted the entire summer of 1997 and consumed 10% of their construction budget before they even owned the property. On the positive side, they learned a lot, and by inviting the Health Department and the Department of Labor & Industry in BEFORE they made changes, they avoided having to do things twice. Bill and Mary were surprised to learn how few people took this step, and how cooperative the agencies were.

The actual "closing" on their property took place on Halloween day of 1997. Their plan was to be fully functional and open for business on April Fool's Day of 1998. In reality, they were completed by about July of 1998, and The Birch Ridge Inn was a reality.

During the construction time, Bill began a marketing plan and established a Web site. The Web site told of their plans and showed pictures of their progress. Visitors were also invited to make advanced reservations; one couple from England was very intrigued by the venture and made the first booking for "Room #4," which they had admired on the Web site.

As it turns out, the Internet is responsible for 60-70% of the room reservations at The Birch Ridge Inn. The inn specializes in catering to couples who are looking for comfortable, romantic getaways in Vermont. Everything about the inn suits that image perfectly, and business is growing. But, this is 2002 and five years have elapsed from "start-up" to success.

Bill and Mary agree that they fully expected three to five years to 'turn the corner.' During that time, they saw many months of negative cash flow, but because they were financially and emotionally prepared for 'hardship prior to success,' they were able to stay relaxed, learn from their experiences, and enjoy the slow times.

Equally important was the "business partnership" that Bill and Mary developed. Both agree that it's critical for partners to have their separate areas of responsibility, and to trust their partner to carry out their responsibilities correctly. As a side note, Bill mentioned, "I'm a night person, while Mary is a morning person... which coincidentally works out well for manning the long hours at the inn."

The rewards for the long, expensive and tedious effort Bill and Mary have invested are many. First and foremost is enjoying the lifestyle that they chose from the very beginning... living in their favorite resort and being able to ski, play golf, and own a business where they meet interesting people. They also appreciate the friendly competition among their peers, who freely share ideas, send them customers, and have become social friends. They find this quite different from the cutthroat urban corporate world.

Their advice for others wishing to move to Vermont is clear: "Be true to yourself. Know what you're good and bad at. Know how your partner fits into the business scheme, and know who you need to hire." Next, "Divide and conquer. Believe in your partner and let them do their job." Finally, "Have a vision and stick with it. Control your heart, use your business sense, and make sure you begin with a solid plan and sufficient capital."

The Birch Ridge Inn has been honored with a well-deserved and flattering listing in the 2001/2002 edition of Fodor's New England, and by a recent article in Ski magazine. The inn features 10 beautifully appointed and cozy guest rooms, a wonderful gourmet restaurant that's open to the public, a spacious "great room" lounge, beautifully landscaped grounds, friendly atmosphere, and a very convenient location just off the Killington Road. I highly recommend that you pay them a visit. For dinner or lodging reservations, call (802) 422-4293 or visit their Web site at [www.birchridge.com](http://www.birchridge.com).

<p>For more information about the Birch Ridge Inn at Killington, please contact :</p> <p>Bill Vines - Mary Furlong          Birch Ridge Inn          37 Butler Road          Killington, Vermont 05751          Reservations: 800-435-8566          Front Desk : 802-422-4293          Fax: 802-422-3406          Email: <a href="mailto:innkeepers@birchridge.com">innkeepers@birchridge.com</a>          Website: <a href="http://www.birchridge.com">www.birchridge.com</a></p>	<p>Reprinted with the permission of the Mountain Times, Killington VT.</p> <p>The Mountain Times          Royal Barnard – Publisher          Box 183          Killington, Vermont 05751          Sales: 802-422-2399          Editorial : 802-422-2398          Fax: 802-422-2395          Email: <a href="mailto:visionvt@aol.com">visionvt@aol.com</a>          Website: <a href="http://www.mtntimes-killington.com">www.mtntimes-killington.com</a></p>
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