

NHBSR MEMBER FEATURE: APRIL 2016

A conversation with [Kevin Johnson, Gale River Motel](#)

Recently we sat down for a phone conversation with Kevin Johnson who owns and runs the Gale River Motel in Franconia. As a new member of NHBSR we wanted to learn more about Kevin, his business and where he finds his sustainability inspiration.

Kevin's story contains a number of "when the stars align" moments. He came into the business after starting down the path of a profession in the mental health field, having received a master's in counseling and psychology. As he thought about work / life balance Kevin references Harry Chapin's 1974 song, "Cats in the Cradle," which tells the story of a father who is too busy with work to spend time with his son and who in turn becomes like his father. Kevin made a promise to himself long before he had a family that when he did he would put his family first, with career coming second. And in 1997 when his daughter was born the song really began to resonate and served as his incentive to be very intentional about choosing a new career path that would allow for this balance. While being an innkeeper may not have seemed like the logical first choice, there were many aspects that were a good fit. Fortunately, in college Kevin worked in student personal and managed a dormitory, so he thought that inn keeping wasn't that much of a stretch—and certainly guests were likely to be better behaved than rambunctious college students.

He and his wife set out on what would turn into a 3 year search for a lodging property that would be the right fit for their family. They looked in Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire and were clear about finding a property that would be financially viable, that was well located and had a good school system. On their return from one of their many searches, with two tired kids in the backseat, they pulled off the road in Franconia and ended up at the Gale River Motel for the night. They loved the motel right away- and after a tour with the innkeepers it was just what they were looking for – but it wasn't for sale. It wouldn't be until two years later that they would receive a call from their realtor who said "I have just the motel for you—it's just the one you are looking for." As luck would have it the property was called the Gale River Motel. And in under 24 hours they became motel owners. See what we mean about stars aligning? Kevin hasn't looked back since that momentous day and has been happy to uphold the promise he made to himself to put family first and to have been able to meet his kids after school each day.



1 Main Street Franconia NH



We asked Kevin about where he found his inspiration around being green. What we learned is that it harkens back to the 1970's and his father who was an early adopter of not just the idea of being green, but someone who lived it. As an artisan, carpenter and electrician among his many talents, his father built several houses and one of the things he embraced was the desire to be green in ways beyond just recycling. These were the days of the oil embargo and there were programs being promoted to move people towards sustainability. One of the first things that Kevin's father did was build a passive solar greenhouse on the back of the house that essentially heated the entire house. He was one of the first in the county to put up a solar hot water system that allowed him to unplug the electric hot water heater for the rest of the time he owned the house.

So, with this as his introduction, Kevin was thinking green, sustainability and thriftiness from an early age. Having pursued an undergraduate degree in biology he learned even more about the intricacies and web of life we have on this planet and just how sensitive it is. He takes his job of being a good steward and keeping his impact minimal very seriously.



Kevin sees the application of sustainable properties in the hotel/motel/restaurant industry as an evolving process, one which is driven by cost benefit right now. For Kevin he started with the things that were simple and didn't require significant financial investment—changing out incandescent lights and recycling as much as possible—from there he prioritized his next steps. The first big project he undertook at the motel was replacing all of the bathroom windows to tighten up the buildings, followed by replacing his outdated boiler which was heating his domestic hot water. The next big project was installing a solar hot water system.

The latest project, and by far the most significant, was putting in a PV system – PV stands for photovoltaic – which is a 52 panel system installed on the roof, which is designed to be a net zero generator. The system was installed last December and was up and running in early January. With this system in place Kevin's electric bill should be zero. Incentives and tax credits made an otherwise financially prohibitive project possible. Having paid \$2000-2500 a year in electricity in the past, Kevin is anticipating that with this new system the payback will be about 4 years. You can check out his solar log to see what is being generated and used at <http://reda.solarlog-web.net/galeriverpublicdash.html>.

As the saying goes, "slow and steady wins the race." Kevin knew that he couldn't change everything at once which is why over the last ten years he's tackled one project at a time as he

can afford to do them. He has seen the benefits compound quickly. He recognizes that he may have hit a sweet spot, given business size, to have been able to make this latest project work, but encourages others to explore incentives if considering similar projects. Kevin recognizes that not every business or organization may be able to live their philosophy as there are significant financial considerations. Lots of businesses will struggle with that tension in making decisions about how and where they practice their sustainability.

A message to others—Kevin left us with a message to share. As one of the smallest lodging properties in NH, he feels that if he can make these changes in support of a more sustainable business, then anyone can. It's a matter of embracing the desire to do something and taking little steps towards that goal. Start by choosing just one thing- the thing that will have the biggest affordable impact.



The Gale River Motel has been recognized by the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging & Restaurant Program as an Environmental Champion and has earned the 2015 Certificate of Excellence and a Platinum Green Leader status from TripAdvisor.com. With these feathers in his cap, Kevin certainly serves as an inspiration for us all and we hope that you will keep his efforts in mind as you consider your own moving forward.

Kevin will be at the Spring Conference so we hope that you have a chance to meet and talk with him then. You can also find him at the [Gale River Motel](#) in Franconia--- which looks like an amazing place to start an adventure of the area.