

Willoughby Lake Store



Melissa Zebrowski and her family at the Willoughby Lake Store in Westmore.

It would be difficult to find a family with more Vermont in its DNA than the Zebrowskis, of Westmore.

It's not unusual to find the four of them boating and fishing on Willoughby Lake, mountain biking through the Northeast Kingdom, snowmobiling and snowboarding throughout the winter and producing maple syrup when late February rolls around.

"I guess we're a pretty typical Vermont family," says Melissa Zebrowski, owner (along with her husband, Andrew) of the Willoughby Lake Store, in Westmore.

There's also the fact that the store — a classic small-town shop that sits directly across the street from its namesake — acts as an unofficial town center. A tour through its aisles and shelves reveals row after row of Vermont-produced jams, honey, local produce, vegetables, shirts, glasses and mugs.

The couple bought the store, run previously by Jim and Sandy Towns, in June. Since then, a few changes and a commitment to a truly authentic local vibe have helped cement the store as the heart of this northern Vermont community.

Written by Bill Burke

"It really does feel like the hub of the community," Owner Melissa Zebrowski says. "You see regulars who come in every morning for coffee and to catch up. They'll get their breakfast sandwich and chat — you start to develop a relationship with them."

Though there's an easy back-and-forth between the Zebrowskis and their clientele, which is split between visitors and a steady stream of loyal locals, there have been challenges associated with running any new business.

"The way I would describe our first month is like having a newborn baby," Melissa Zebrowski says. "It's like having your first child, ever. You don't know what to expect."

Luckily, the family was as prepared as could be expected, thanks to the expertise of the former owners. The Towns bought and reopened the Willoughby Lake Store eight years ago. This past year they decided to slow down, which is when the Zebrowskis stepped in.

"We spent a great deal of time at the store and formed a really good friendship with Jim and Sandy," Zebrowski says. "Even though we weren't in the weeds of the store, we saw how the store was run, and they've been really great mentors to us. It's been a great transition. We're ready to take the store to the next level."

The new owners added an outdoor seating area, and renovated the living quarters above the store — a pair of one-room inns with private bathrooms, which will be available on Airbnb.

Step inside the nearly 2,500-square-foot store and visitors encounter a coffee area, a section dedicated to the fishing that brings many people to Lake Willoughby — rods, lures, bait and licenses included — a deli where fresh bread is baked daily and the Vermont state liquor agency.

"It's on the side of the store and separate, so a lot of people can order from the outside," Zebrowski says.

Tucked inside the welcoming store, which is run by two full-time workers and six part-timers, the agency is made up of a collection of shelves in a U-shape that includes an entire section dedicated to Vermont-crafted spirits. The top seller — no surprise, given the Green Mountain heritage in every inch of the Willoughby Lake Store — is the Metcalfe's Vermont Maple Cream Liqueur, produced in Marlboro.

The through-line that is the ever-present Vermont connection leads right to the popular ice cream window, which offers — among many other items — a classic maple creemee. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, guests often line up for a cool treat. A consistent favorite? Either Maine Black Bear or Moose Tracks. Bring your four-legged friend along and they can also indulge with a half-scoop of vanilla with a biscuit on top.

"It's very, very busy," Zebrowski says of the ice cream window.

In the end, however, it all comes down to the community created within the store, Zebrowski says.

"I love the relationships we're creating," she says. "Our kids are getting to meet some pretty great people who come to Willoughby every year, year after year. That's what I love the most."

"You get to learn what your customers like and you get to know them, but it goes beyond that. You form a friendship with them and they get to know your family. It's nice." ☺

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