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# A Room of One's Own

## The Highland Inn Proprietor Grace Newman Celebrates 20 Years of 'Lesbian Paradise'

BY JUDITH BECKETT

Grace Newman and Judi Hall came to New Hampshire from Brookline, Mass. (just outside of Boston), in 1983 in search of the piece of property that would one day become known as a "Lesbian Paradise." The abandoned inn on the property they bought in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, that May had no running water and no electricity. The foundation had caved in and there was a persistent leak from the living room ceiling that mystified the roofer, electrician and plumber. When it was discovered that a family of raccoons was living (and urinating) above the ceiling, Grace and Judi were advised to tear the building down and start over again.

"But," Grace told me, "this is a 200 year-old building. We wanted to preserve that."

Neither had any experience as a general contractor. Nevertheless, they took on the job with enthusiasm. A month and a half later, they ran out of money and had to apply to a local bank for a loan.

Grace said the bank sent over a VP who "didn't like financing inns, renovations or women in business." The two women greeted him, hammer and paintbrush in hand, and invited him to look around. By the time the VP returned to the bank that afternoon, he was raving about the work the two "girls" were doing. The next day they had the loan. Incredibly, the Highlands Inn was open and ready for its first guests in August of that same year.

This year, the 19-room Inn celebrates its 20th birthday. That's why I was driving down a long, snow-covered road to interview Grace Newman for *Out In the Mountains*. The sign back on Route 320 just outside Bethlehem, NH (about two and a half hours' drive from Burlington), had said "No Vacancies" but I'd

been warned that this was a subterfuge to discourage folks driving by from just dropping in.

At the Inn, Grace's schnauzer, Daisy, greeted me, bouncing up and down like a furry ping-pong ball and barking zealously. Grace and I introduced ourselves and then she suggested that I "settle in" before we talked. She invited me to check out each of the twelve unoccupied rooms upstairs so I could choose a room for the night.

She led me up the purple-carpeted stairs to the second floor, opening one door after another so I could compare rooms. They were all scrumptious. Over the years, Grace has decorated and redecorated them herself using soft floral fabrics and warm colors. Some of the beds, dressers and tables are antiques. Grace pointed out which rooms had views of the gardens, the woods and the sunset but I chose a warm and cheerful corner room decorated in yellows and greens.

Once I'd "settled in," I returned downstairs. Grace and I piled on our coats, gloves, and boots and tramped outside to see the other buildings. Although only one of the rooms in the Main Inn was occupied this frigid afternoon in January, both the Farmhouse and the Cottage had guests. I expected to meet them all the next morning at breakfast.

As Grace and I walked, we talked. She told me she has been sole proprietor of the inn since 1990. Although she tried to go it alone for a few years (cooking, cleaning and changing sheets herself), she now employs a part-time assistant and two housekeepers.

"Even so," Grace said, "it's a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week job. Renovating gives me something different to do."

First, Grace purchased the old farmhouse, reuniting it with the Inn. After the farmhouse had been restored, she tackled a broken-down storage shed. That shed is now the Cottage. More recent renovations have included

eliminating the two shared baths and adding a pool and hot tubs inside and out.

Bethlehem has a long history as a resort town. During the 1800s, the property was a dairy farm, but the original owners rented out rooms to tourists. As many as thirty trains a day arrived from Washington, Boston, and New York, bringing movie stars and kings along with regular folks into town. Many of them suffered from hay fever. Bethlehem was a hay fever cure.

Grace explained that New Hampshire has a short growing season, so there wasn't



much pollen in the air. Besides, if there was even a rumor of ragweed anywhere around, town officials were sent out to destroy the plant.

After WWII and the development of antihistamines, the town went into decline. The 60s and 70s were tough years. Grace and Judi were among the first to buy up old property on which taxes had not been paid in many years. They were also the first to open a major inn and make a go of it in Bethlehem. "Many have come and gone over the years," Grace says, "What's amazing is that this is a lesbian inn."

Back in her office, Grace handed me a copy of the new 2003 brochure. "No one's seen it," she confided. "It's still at the printers."

She'll soon be mailing out copies to 6,500 lesbians and e-mailing the info to another 5,000.

The Highland Inn's 20th birthday party will be held over the weekend of May 2-4. The brochure says there will be "a catered dinner followed by a fabulous party with a DJ and dancing." The fourth Women's Concert Series will have six events in all, one more performance than last year. Another Murder Mystery Weekend is scheduled October 24-26 - it's the 12th annual! There's free food and lodging for the annual weekend of clearing the ski trails and stacking the wood. The date hasn't been scheduled yet but, "You *must* bring your own tools - chainsaws, brush cutters, and/or loppers."

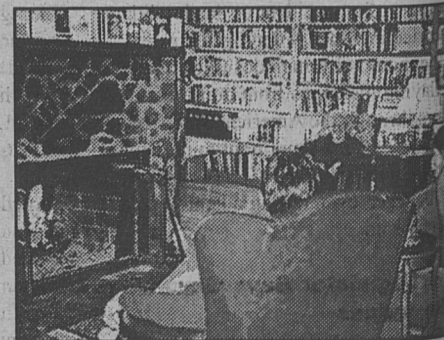
This Valentine's Day may inspire a call for the Romance Package or even the Deluxe Honeymoon Package. Romantics like myself can get teary-eyed looking over the scrapbook containing photos of women reading their vows and celebrating their union with friends.

A sign above a map of the United States on the wall by the fireplace reads: "Look Who's Been CU'd." The colored pushpins are mostly clustered in the Northeast but then they spread out all across the country. One hundred and fifty couples have exchanged vows at the Highlands Inn.

Overall, Graces thinks that Bethlehem was a good place for opening and running a lesbian inn. She is planning an open house this spring, inviting the local community in to see what she's accomplished in twenty years.

Driving away from the Highlands Inn, I pass the Farmhouse on my right. The individual sitting on the front porch with her dog at her feet is so completely swaddled in layers of winter garb that only her eyes can be seen. Woman and dog watch me as I drive by.

Slowly, the woman raises a mittened hand and waves. It's ten below zero. And still they come. ▼



above, The Highlands Inn, inside and out