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Inn rebuilding the past – New managers at the Black Point Inn have a new business strategy

By Leslie Bridgers
Reporter-The Current

SCARBOROUGH (May 24, 2007): After 129 years of continuous operation, the Black Point Inn on Prouts Neck in Scarborough is going through major renovations in appearance and attitude to help recreate the atmosphere of its past.

"We're going to bring it back," said Neil Porta, who is operating the inn with his brother, Tim. "We see this as a sort of rebirth of an old, classic New England hotel."

Construction is finishing up at the inn, as the managers and investors prepare for the new season, which opens June 15. The Porta brothers, who own the Migis Lodge on Sebago Lake, have decades of experience with seasonal resorts and are applying their knowledge to help renew tradition at the Black Point Inn. With few rooms and a new, welcoming attitude toward the surrounding community, the Portas hope to create a relaxed, social atmosphere for guests from both here and away.

The effort is an important one to the town of Scarborough, where the Black Point Inn has been renown across the country for generations. "Keeping the inn, keeping it open to the public and updating it the right way will be good for Scarborough," said Harvey Rosenfeld, president of Scarborough Economic Development Corp.

A major part of the construction has been removing all the additions to the main building, restoring its 1925 footprint. In addition, three cottages that were previously used to house more guests have been individually sold, altogether reducing the number of rooms at the inn from 84 to 25.

According to Porta, the purpose of downsizing is to recreate the inn's former summer resort style. Porta said in recent years the inn had become more commercial, catering to big weddings and corporate functions rather than to couples and families looking to get away to coastal Maine for days and weeks at a time. Porta said the facility will accommodate only small weddings and functions. After Labor Day, larger parties will be accepted until season closing, Jan. 1.

"When they come to a place like this, they come to be here," Porta said about guests at resort-style hotels – and he would know. It's no accident the Porta brothers are running the place. They were hand chosen to lease and manage the inn by BPI Partners, the group of private investors who bought the inn in 2005, because of their experience.

The Portas grew up on Martha's Vineyard, where their family owned several hotels. "We've been doing this since we were kids," Neil Porta said. "We're comfortable with it."

In 1968, their family bought the Migis Lodge, an expansive resort with a relaxed atmosphere on Sebago Lake in South Casco. The brothers currently own and operate the lodge, which has been around since 1916 and offers 100 acres of woods and 3,500 feet of shoreline for guests to enjoy at their leisure.

"They have such a great reputation," said Og Hunnewell, one of leaders of BPI Partners, about the Porta

brothers. "This is what we thought was appropriate to run the Black Point Inn."

The Black Point Inn was built in 1878, when it was known as Southgate House and was one of several hotels on Prouts Neck. Now, the only one to remain, the inn is a member of Historic Hotels of America and part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. BPI Partners purchased the inn from Eric Chianchette, owner of the Portland Regency Hotel.

"It's a real fixture in Prouts Neck," Rosenfeld said.

The 40 investors that make up BPI Partners are all already property owners on Prouts Neck. One of the main goals for Porta and the investors is to reach out to the community and encourage locals to come and use the inn.

"People in the area thought this was private," Porta said.

"They had the feeling that this was a club," said Cheryl Lewis, who will serve as the executive chef and run the inn's dining operations, along with her longtime business partner, Norine Kotts.

It will be through the inn's dining facilities that Porta hopes to involve the community, and he believes Lewis and Kotts are just the people for the job.

"They brought fine dining to Portland," Porta said of Lewis and Kotts, who owned both Cafe Always and Aurora Provisions in Portland. Lewis said she has spent the last five years working in consulting, but misses the adrenaline rush of working in a kitchen.

"I never thought I'd be back in the saddle the way I am now," Lewis said.

Lewis said she is in the process of finalizing the restaurant's menus, which, she said, will offer detailed, elegant, contemporary fare. Lewis said she will try to incorporate the offerings of local farms and that everything will be made from scratch.

"We won't be using can openers here," she said.

The inn will have two menus – one for the formal dining room and another for the more casual Chart Room, which will be decorated in a nautical theme complete with bar, deck seating and nightly jazz.

Porta particularly hopes local people will take advantage of the casual dining to stop by for a weeknight dinner, early evening cocktails or lunch by the pool. Lewis hopes to see dog-walkers on Scarborough Beach coming up for scones and coffee in the morning. A weekly buffet is also being planned to help bring in area residents.

"I really like the idea of the restaurant," Rosenfeld said. "I think that's needed in town."

Lewis hopes to see a lot of her former customers from Portland coming to Prouts Neck – and she knows how much good food and good service mean to them.

"It makes them smile," Lewis said. "You live for that."

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