

Behind the Business: Travel Leaders



photo: Mary Pat Kelley — Photography by Date

Did you ever think you need a vacation — from planning your vacation? Coordinating flights with car rental reservations and check-in times and seeing all the sights while still getting some R&R can be overwhelming. Luckily, Hagerstown has its own branch of the national franchise Travel Leaders, where owner Belinda Stull and her staff take care of all the details.

"Each trip is a puzzle," says Belinda. "I'm very detail-oriented and like making sure that each trip matches what the client is looking for." Deriving a great sense of satisfaction in finding what's really best for each patron, Belinda especially enjoys helping people plan their once-in-a-lifetime or special family vacations.

But she never planned to enter the travel industry. Belinda was a proofreader and copy planner by trade, well-versed in office administration. After interviewing for a bookkeeper position for a travel agency, she became fascinated with the idea. After that, "I called agencies until someone gave me a job."

Beginning as an entry-level agent, Belinda worked her way up to manager for two travel schools. For eight years, she managed the local branch of the Carlson Wagonlit agency. The office was sold in 1998 to a large conglomerate that left the parent company. With her father's help, Belinda bought the local franchise last year. Though Carlson Wagonlit's name changed to Travel Leaders after a corporate sale, she's been running her business with the same principles since it opened. "Our philosophy is that if we give good service — not just a good price, but good value — we will retain and grow our repeat business."

Those values form a solid foundation in an ever-evolving industry. "Even 15 years ago, we were on the phone most of the day." Now most bookings are done through agent sites, which allow the agent to see more options on a screen than they could get through a representative on the telephone. Belinda admits that her biggest challenge is trying to make the business work in an ever-changing field. "It's a job where one day is never the same as another. Sometimes, I wish it wasn't!" she says, jokingly.

It's clear Belinda and her team are passionate about giving their patrons the best vacations possible. And when Belinda needs a break from the daily grind, she turns to Hawaii — "any island is fine with me!" — *Ann Davis*

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