

Reviving the North Branch Inn

BY JEANNE SAGER

NORTH BRANCH — Ask Victoria Lesser why she's sunk her savings into turning around a corner of North Branch history and you'll get another question.

"Why not?" she asks. "Why can't North Branch turn around?"

"If Callicoon Center can still have the courage to still have that band, why not?" she ponders.

Lesser isn't made of money.

Yes, she once made Bill Cosby's pajamas and sold clothes to the Bee Gees.

But she laughed when a local boy helping her out at the old North Branch Inn asked if she was retired.

"No, I'm not retired," she said. "I'm working to pay the bills. Thank goodness for Tanya Hahn at the Jeff Bank, who I keep going to and telling, 'It's going to be great!'"

This is her work.

Rehabbing a hotel that was once a landmark on a bustling main street.

Now it's one of just two buildings to see business — the other is the post office.

On one side is section 8 housing. The rest of North Branch's "Main Street" is residential or worse — one-time commercial that's been shuttered.

When Lesser discovered the old "cowboy building" as she likes to call it, she was looking for a part-time residence in the county where she spent her summers.

She planned to spend the rest of her time in Key West, where she'd been living for more than 20 years.

But Key West has gone commercial.

"The people who gave it its flavor can't afford to live there anymore!" she said.

"I moved to Key West when it was a feast or famine town," Lesser recalled.

Sort of like Sullivan County.

She sold her home in Key West and bought a place in Callicoon Center.

Then she hired her realtor, Trash Queen Kathy Reiser, to help haul out the guts of the North Branch Inn.

She was starting from scratch — literally.

Main Street grants weren't available for someone doing a job on North Branch's main drag.

That's what she wants to change.

"It was quite the town back in the day," Lesser said. "I never experienced when the cider mill was open, but there were three hotels here, people would line up to get cider . . ."

"As far as this place is concerned," she said, waving her hands around in a sweeping motion,

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JEANNE SAGER | DEMOCRAT

Victoria Lesser left Key West when "it went too commercial" and now lives in Callicoon Center while renovating the old North Branch Inn.

NORTH BRANCH: 'It really is about the town of North Branch'

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"it really is about the town of North Branch.

"I'm hoping the next person who does something on this main street can get some help from a main street improvement grant."

To make that possible, Lesser said she's spent the money necessary to bring back the 1880s building locally.

Contractor Teb Fink and family has done the carpentry, plumber Doug Santoro of DJS the plumbing and brothers Brian and Matt Kitson of Thomas Electric the wiring.

Bob Schmidt did the floors, Jim Roemer the painting.

Supplies have come from Kohler Lumber and Callicoon Supply, and choice furnishings from La Shed Du Fred.

Even the sign for the new inn will be crafted by Craig Stewart.

"Just because people show up doesn't mean they do what they say they're going to do," Lesser noted. "But the level of integrity... they had the patience and had the respect for what my art is. I couldn't have done any of this without them."

Together they've created a hotel and juice bar.

Six rooms and a bathroom upstairs have been turned into four bedrooms, each with a private bath.

Lesser has an apartment downstairs, and the remainder of the former bar will become a coffee and juice bar.

Flour Power and Little Miss Muffin will provide baked goods, Ziggy's will have doggy treats on sale, Pika's Quiches' refrigerated and frozen goodies will be for sale, and the old bowling alley has been restored where Lesser will set up antiques and collectibles for sale.

She's intent on creating a place

for local people to go, not as a replacement for the Trading Post convenience store down the road but as a Wi-Fi cafe of sorts.

"I'm not trying to compete with anyone locally," Lesser said. "I'm trying to expand."

Until she receives the OK from the board of health to bring in fresh juices and coffees and other local vendors, Lesser has brought in singer Moby's teas and Gus' sodas to ensure she's providing something no one else has rather than duplicate the offerings at the Trading Post.

The daily papers will be available, and folks can get their coffee and sit on the front porch to watch people go by on the well-traveled road.

The rooms upstairs will hopefully be let to people who are visiting the locals, Lesser said.

"I'd like to think it's under the premise of six degrees of separation - that's how the rooms will get filled," she explained. "Someone who knows someone here will come to stay, and they'll tell someone else, and it will spread like word of mouth."

Lesser hopes people will come, and, like her, fall in love, buy a home, become a local.

"This is really about being able to help [North Branch] revitalize," Lesser said. "You spend your money where you live, you use the services of people who live here.

"People want to get the mail, come over, sit on the porch, have a cup of coffee," she continued. "It's really about bringing the North Branch Inn back.

"Only now it will be how buzzed they got on their coffee, not how drunk they got at the bar!" she added with a laugh.

Lesser said the local children will be welcome to do their homework in the cafe on snowy days, and she hopes eventually to show movies in the lounge.

The place will also be available for rent to small parties and weddings - with the rooms upstairs for the guests and a kitchen on

'You spend your money where you live...'

Victoria Lesser
Entrepreneur

premises for a caterer.

The former hotel pool in the backyard will soon be covered as a pavilion of sorts, which could host small gatherings such as a farmers market or old-fashioned auction.

"I'm going to have to make it up as I go along," Lesser said with a laugh. "In my past life, it was never about nickels, dimes and quarters, but that's what it will have to be.

"I want to create a balance, to give to the community, not just take," she continued. "I'm open to suggestions.

"When people say, 'I'd love it if you... ' If I can, I will."

Lesser will be opening on the weekend of August 11 for what she calls a sneak peek.

People can get a behind-the-doors look, have a taste test and peruse the merchandise.

Most of all, it will be a day to say "thank you," Lesser said.

"The support I've been getting from people I don't even know - I want them to see I did what I said I was going to do," she noted. "I left Key West because Key West lost that sense of community, but with all my fancy clients, I love simple."

And she's here to stay.

The new North Branch Inn is located right on the main drag in North Branch.

For information, check out www.theoldnorthbranchinn.com or give Lesser a call at 482-5925.