

Gail Riley does it for the love of Evergreen...

Since moving to Colorado in 1979, Gail Riley has been motivated by the charm of our mountain community, and she's been stimulating improvements ever since while influencing what needs to be preserved.

It's like the balancing act of a good marriage.

Vacationing from the Bay Area, she and husband Tom Statzell were taken with the blue skies, the rock outcroppings, the blue spruce, and the inviting personality of Evergreen while bedding down at a drive-in motel located on lower Main Street. Before their stay was up, they'd ask the owners if they'd consider selling.

With a couple of partners, Riley and Statzell acquired the seasonal business centered around the four months of mountain summers. With help from their families, they soon bought out their partners, becoming sole owners of Highland Haven and were "scared to pieces" about what they'd gotten themselves into.

"We added a horseshoe pit and promoted the property as a 'resort motel,'" Gail says with a laugh, reflecting on how the year-round luxury creekside inn has evolved, now boasting 900+ reservations annually.

Gail and Tom raised their two children in their home attached to the inn. The rope swing across the creek still hangs for others who have come and gone.

The memorable getaway encompasses 18 rooms and cabins, including the Dailey Cabin, which dates back to the 1800s. "The main lodge was built by the government for housing teachers," Gail explains. Now it rents out for intimate weddings and small, private parties. And the addition of a 2-story treehouse put icing on the cake for those wanting a spectacular romantic getaway close to home.

The long list of recognition and awards range from Best Bed & Breakfast to Most Romantic Hideaway and Best Honeymoon Getaway. The business has been named Trip Advisor Traveler's Choice for 15 years and the Chamber's Business of the year twice.

Tom's woodworking skills enabled them to upgrade the exteriors and interior finishes – an ongoing project – and Gail's artistic talents were linked to interior design and comfort features. "There's never a day we don't improve something." They work together well.

It's the special touches and the accommodating, friendly staff that have built a reputation for Highland Haven known to bring travelers back for a dozen or more visits over the past 45 years. Reviews often include comments about their "perfect hospitality."



"We always try to make it magic," she says, beaming.

Not only has Gail mastered the art of hospitality but she's written a few books to document what works. In 2012 she published *Colorado Cravings*, followed by *Colorado Romance*, *Colorado Kids*, and soon-to-come *Colorado Décor*.

Fortunately, investing in her community with time and energy comes naturally for Gail, not only as a business owner but also as a person whose mother was a good role model in that regard. Starting with being an ambassador for the Chamber of Commerce and then helping to create the Sculpture Walk were among her first volunteer activities.

She served on the board of Sculpture Evergreen (originally Art for the Mountain Community when it formed in 1994 and now since 2023 a part of Center for the Arts Evergreen) for many years, influencing the dozens of sculptures that appear from Alderfer Three Sisters Park, through downtown, along Evergreen Parkway, to Bergen Park.

One of the sculptures — a dramatic, interpretive white marble piece of a tall couple intertwined called "Intimacy" — has a permanent home amidst the waters of Bear Creek in front of Highland Haven Creekside Inn.

The organization is responsible for 49 permanent sculptures throughout Evergreen and another dozen temporary sculptures on loan for a year at a time. More than just jurying the artists and pieces proposed, the group secures permission from landowners, draws up legal documents, arranges for insurance on the installations, and hires a crane to lift the pieces in and out of position.

She was on the first advisory board for



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– Dean Dalvit

Leadership Evergreen and turned over the entire inn for the inaugural class's retreat – every room free to the program as a sponsor. Influencing the future of Evergreen through good leadership was important to her in 1995 and still is.

When a group of people started meeting about how to improve the area, Gail showed up to shame "them" for not doing better. When she realized there was no "they" to blame in an unincorporated area, she became one of the first board members of the organization now known as the Evergreen Legacy Fund (ELF) and wore down the soles of many pairs of shoes signing up members to collect a voluntary 1% to support the effort.

"Gail was pivotal in defining the core mission of our organization to serve that very purpose," says Dean Dalvit, president of ELF. "Gail's generosity with her time and resources is unmatched and we all owe her a debt of gratitude for everything she has done for our community."

To date the organization has turned over several hundred thousand dollars to Jefferson County, leveraging grants totaling five times that amount to accomplish infrastruc-

ture projects built and maintained by the county. Highland Haven has passed through more donations than any other business over the years.

The County then produces the improvement like a sidewalk or crosswalk, a bike lane, or a pedestrian link between the lake and downtown and maintains it "forever." While with ELF, Gail was the liaison with schools to create two murals – one in the tunnel connecting the lake to downtown, the other on the walls of the water treatment facility near the dam.

She retired from the ELF board after a 12-year run. "I'm really proud of how we've become something that Evergreen can be proud of." Gail is one who wears her pride on her face for everyone to see.

Now one finds her mentoring students from Warren Tech's hospitality program, helping them sketch out résumés, putting them through practice sessions with interviews, and through job shadowing exposing them to hospitality skills they might not otherwise have an opportunity to observe firsthand.

It's understandable why Gail Riley would have been one of the first women in Evergreen to be inducted into the Mountain Area Women in Business Hall of Fame.

Making her community a better place is something Gail does on a daily basis, creating a subtle but far-reaching legacy of her own ... for the love of Evergreen.



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