

Guardian Travel/Travel Expo

World traveler and cancer survivor Janet Swinehart hosts an event for travel lovers

BY RENE E OLMO

Janet Swinehart is a self-starter and a world-class traveler. Fifteen years ago, she focused her enthusiasm on opening up her own travel agency, Guardian Travel Inc. located in Greenbrier. She has watched her business thrive despite a surge in do-it-yourself travel websites. The secret to her success is based on the simple philosophy that exceptional customer service is the hallmark of a good travel agency.

Guardian Travel is known for its personal touch and attention to the smallest details to help individuals, couples and families find the perfect vacation to fit their needs.

"Eighty percent of our business is referral or repeat clients," Janet says. "We offer clients an entirely different wealth of experience from a website service. We are real people, who have real experience and spend vast amounts of time and energy in trying to help travelers have a fantastic and memorable travel experience."

Janet has been married to her husband, Dave, for 39 years. During the early years of her marriage, she had several jobs that never seemed to fit her personality: factory worker, accountant, real estate agent, construction estimator, but nothing really clicked.

"Finally, my husband presented me with an idea. He said, 'If you could do anything you wanted to do, what would you do?' I chose the travel business," she recalls of the decision that has brought her so much personal satisfaction. "I have always enjoyed traveling, as a couple, as a family, and in church missionary work. It's something that I really love to do and am passionate about."

"Dave is my travel partner. We travel extensively, and he is wonderful about helping with my 'destination research.' We've been on trips where we've toured 15 hotels in one day. I go into rooms and suites, check out the amenities, meet the managers. I really want to gather enough information to benefit our customers. Dave is a good sport, and thankfully, I can keep up with him because he is a very fast walker!" she says smiling, recalling a whirlwind tour of China. "I really want to be able to give our clients value for their money by knowing if something is worth the cost."

"Many people make the incorrect assumption that contacting a travel agency will cost them more money; it's the exact opposite. We can find the best deals on packages, tours, cruises, hotels, and transportation. We have 10 travel agents on staff who work hard to find the best prices for clients," Janet explains. "There is a lot of information out there, and it can be overwhelming and frustrating. Our job is to help people narrow down some of the options, and help them find the perfect destination for them."

Last October, Janet developed an idea of sponsoring a travel expo after she participated in the City of Chesapeake's First Annual Wine Festival held at the city park. "The planners expected 3,500 people to attend, and more than 7,000 showed up. It was wonderful, and it got me thinking about a venue that could showcase all aspects of travel," Janet recalls.

The idea grew into a date and place, and Janet had already lined up several dozen vendors before she hired Nicole Newsome to coordinate the Guardian Travel/Travel Expo. "It's all things travel — before, during and after," Nicole explains.

The expo will feature \$10,000 worth of door prizes throughout the day, ranging from a \$2,000 4 night/5

day all-inclusive vacation at a Barcelo Resort to a \$300 gift certificate to any Delta Vacation. In fact, Nicole anticipates that even more door prizes will be added before the event.

"Anyone who's planning to travel just has to attend this event," Nicole says excitedly. "The Travel Expo is going to be amazing. We'll have special booking packages available on the day of the show that won't be available online. There will be tons of discounts and promotions offered by our industry vendors and sponsors."

The day promises to be a travel-information bonanza with over 100 exhibitors and sponsors from all facets of travel. "We'll have all types of cruise lines, European travel, all-inclusive packages, Orlando vacations, but we will also have out-of-the-ordinary travel information available including pet sitters, cosmetics, travel accessories, educational seminars, South African adventures and Costa Rica zip-lining — it's going to be huge. It's a great opportunity to ask questions from people in the travel industry who are knowledgeable about specific destinations," Nicole promises.

And it will all be for a good cause: a dollar from each ticket sold will be donated to the Chesapeake Regional Medical Center's Sidney M. Oman Cancer Treatment Center to help fund new research and technologies.

Janet always knew that she wanted the Expo to have a charitable component, and, as a cancer survivor herself, she knew that would be the cause she'd honor.

"My daughter, Michelle Bancroft, who's now grown and married, was just 10 years old when I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease in 1983," Janet says quietly. "After two rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, the doctors were out of treatment options and gave me just six months to live.

"Dave and I had just moved to Virginia, so we were away from all of our family in Pennsylvania. It was a rough time for us, but then we got some good news about an experimental drug in England that had saved a woman with the same type of cancer, and she had survived for a year. I decided to go for it."

Janet underwent a grueling six-month regimen that caused her terrible nausea and left her bedridden for the weekend until she got up on Monday to get back to her job as an accountant in a builder's office. She needed the job to pay for her medical insurance. Miraculously, she survived the treatment and even went on to deliver a healthy son, Ryan, who is now 20.

"I have been a survivor for 28 years," Janet says humbly. "I really appreciate the wonders of the world, both the sorrows and the joy. My faith definitely led me through my trials, and got me through the toughest moments of it. I am thankful for every day."

The answer to her husband's question has led Janet to the successful career of her dreams, and helped her to make travel dreams come true for others. Her upcoming Guardian Travel/Travel Expo is going to



Owner Janet Swinehart, left, and event co-ordinator Nicole Newsome

make even more dreams come true — for travelers, for prize winners and for those in the fight against cancer.

"The perfect way for people to get started to become part of this wonderful event is for them to go directly to our website at www.guardiantravelexpo.com," Janet points out. "They'll be able to conveniently order their tickets and get the most up to date information on what they'll enjoy on September 10."



September 10, 2011
Chesapeake Conference Center
Noon until 6 p.m.

\$5 - Online Advance Ticket
\$5 - Pickup Advance Ticket
\$7 - Door Ticket (day of show)
Children 16 and under -- Free!



GUARDIAN TRAVEL

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