

BUSINESS LIFE

C-Section

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BUSINESS

REAL ESTATE

CLASSIFIEDS



Pasha Carroll/The Sun

JoAnne Stapleton and Jennifer Warwick are the owners of It's a Shore Thing, a wedding planning business in Walton County.

Watching over the perfect wedding

BY PASHA CARROLL
SUN REPORTER

On her wedding day at Grayton Beach, the rain fell.

But even gallons of rain wouldn't have stopped Leann Carr from marrying her love, Rance Thompson. So their wedding planner, always ready for rain, engaged the back up plan. A beach wedding soon turned into a beach house wedding.

When Carr descended from three stories up, the smile spread across her face must have touched each guest. For they began to hum in unison, "Here Comes the Bride."

Just like that, lucky rain and a smart planner turned an otherwise soggy wedding into a personal ceremony for not only the bride and groom but for the guests as well.

"Moments like that make a wedding so sweet," Jennifer Warwick, the co-owner and wedding planner from It's a Shore Thing, in Santa Rosa Beach said about her client's rained out day.

Growing up Warwick didn't dream about a career as a wedding planner. In fact, she was a third grade teacher before switching gears when she moved to Walton County in February 2001.

"When I moved here (from Naperville, Ill.) I knew I had to come up with a customer service job," she said.

A teacher's salary in Walton County would not have been enough for her to live on, Warwick explained.

Warwick had the knack for planning. She helped friends plan their weddings. But it was after taking the reigns at a chaotic reception at the Sandestin Beach Club, where she was waiting on tables, that wedding planning chose Warwick.



"I thought, 'I have to do this'," she said.

Warwick sat in the wedding isle of Barnes and Nobles and organized her soon to be

career. She said it was the

book, "101 Best Home-Based Businesses for Women" that outlined the how-to of becoming a planner. With all of the work involved in a business, Warwick brought in a partner she knew she could trust.

Warwick's mother, JoAnne Stapleton explained her initial involvement as "doing what mothers do," when the former nurse came to the Emerald Coast in June 2001 to help her daughter start a business.

In July, Warwick attended a weeklong class in Atlanta through the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants. There she learned the specifics of wedding planning and other small details that make special days organized and successful.

The first wedding It's a Shore Thing officially helped coordinate was at Carillon Beach with Larry Bonds, a minister who has since passed away. Now, with more than 100 weddings under their belt, Stapleton and Warwick say they have learned from each wedding.

Ninety-nine percent of the weddings planned by It's a Shore Thing are destination weddings, meaning that the wedding party is from somewhere else, but are having the whole gala on the coast. Warwick said she has planned only a few weddings for locals.

It's a ShoreThing offers various packages primarily custom created, to accom-



Courtesy photo

Chessie Morgan and Hunter Wagner were married on the beach at Seaside on April 17, the wedding was coordinated by It's a Shore Thing.

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modate every size wedding. The mother-daughter duo has planned ceremonies as small as two people eloping on the beach to 300 people having a full wedding weekend, Stapleton said.

"Every wedding is important to us, tiny weddings or great big weddings, they are all equally important," she said.

Initially, when a bride calls, Warwick said that she tries to be as excited as the new bride-to-be. The bride tells the planners her dreams then they see where they fit.

A bride using It's a Shore Thing fills out a book provided by the planners, that leaves no stone unturned. It covers everything from a checklist for a perfect wedding day to a checklist for a marriage license in Florida.

The full service package is everything from A to Z, Stapleton said.

It includes planning the entire wedding ceremony and the reception. The

bride just makes final decisions. It's a Shore Thing gives the bride recommendations for local vendors with proven reliability and also coordinates the day's wedding plans. The ladies outline every detail from weekend agenda packets to luggage delivery to the honeymoon suite.

The day of planning package is for the bride who has done all the planning and only wants professionals to coordinate details and choreograph the wedding day activities. This plan includes a custom timeline and itinerary for the wedding party and the vendors, so everybody stays in synch and remains organized on the big day.

"The more preparation I do ahead of time, the smoother it runs," Warwick said.

The smallest package offered by It's a Shore Thing is the ceremony package.

"We build a package," Stapleton said, which is



Courtesy photo

LaDana Latham and Oliver Carter's October 23 wedding at Rosemary Beach was coordinated by It's a Shore Thing.

custom for each wedding and may include an arbor, flowers and an officiate (she is a licensed officiate.)

"Every time we sit down with a client they ask the average cost, there isn't one," Warwick said.

The cost for It's a Shore Thing wedding planning is determined during a com-

plimentary consultation and has a variety of factors, such as the number of guests, and which package is chosen. Warwick said she knows everybody has a budget.

"We will tell clients if they don't have enough money (for the kind of or size wedding they want)," she said.

After three years in business, It's a Shore Thing has come upon a few quirks that make consulting and planning a wedding not always a delight.

If a wedding is going to

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AUCTION

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have more than 100 people, Warwick suggests starting plans at least a year in advance. "It is getting harder because locations are getting sparse," she said. "It is becoming so popular that there are so few spots you have to book way in advance."

Stapleton said that it is hard when brides only hire them to do day of work, but ask for full planning information like recommendations for every vendor.

"Our product is information," she said. The full package includes more information than the day of or ceremony package, which also takes more of the planner's time.

Warwick said that weddings don't run smooth without legitimate vendors. She said one wedding where the bride did take care of the flowers and catering herself, ended up "a disaster." The organization of a wedding is thrown off without cooperation from all sides, including vendors, Warwick said.

Warwick and Stapleton agree the ability to get specific wedding paraphernalia, like a bride's dress and a guest book, is a challenge in Walton County. The closest place they can recommend is Simply Elegant in Fort Walton Beach. Most brides get their dress and such in their hometowns.

Last minute problems, like rain, forgotten flowers and busted bustles always

keep Warwick and Stapleton on their feet. They have learned to always have a plan B, a tent, an alternate location or a spot to buy boutonnieres on the fly. Warwick said that she has done the simple job of bustling a wedding dress many times, which means getting under a dress to gather it.

"I have seen lots of brides butts," she joked.

For this reason It's a Shore Thing brings an emergency basket on the day of a wedding. The basket has possible essentials in it, such as a hammer and nails, eye drops, ear-ring backs, pins, super glue and medicine for wedding day ailments.

Warwick also recommends WedSafe to all of their clients. WedSafe is a wedding insurance program out of Britain that covers all losses from a canceled wedding.

"Our role is to make everything run smooth," Warwick said. "But the bottom line is, has there ever been a flawless wedding?"

To ensure a wedding is as flawless as possible, Warwick has seat and professional lineups copied for the wedding party. The wedding party and all vendors also get a timeline of the day's events.

Michael McGee and Meredith Clopper's wedding, planned by It's a Shore Thing was on Inlet Beach in October.

Clopper said that she was a mess as she watched

Hurricane Ivan inch closer and closer to her natural wedding chapel while she was planning her dream wedding from home in Tulsa, Okla.

"At least I wasn't stressed out about the wedding, because thanks to Ivan, I already had a nervous breakdown," she said.

Clopper said that her wedding planners found a new, better beach house for her wedding after the original beach house in Destin was damaged.

Warwick, Stapleton and Clopper worked together to get the new address out to vendors and guests.

"After all the chaos, it

worked out really well," Clopper said. "The house that JoAnne and Jennifer found was so beautiful that after having the wedding there, I couldn't imagine anything else," she said.

The business gained recognition and has increasingly grown after one of their weddings was featured in Southern Living Weddings in 2003.

To help with the work load, It's a Shore Thing has five assistants who work when they are needed and will bring in an office manager when they move into their new office. They have been working out of Warwick's home.

At the new location, It's

a Shore Thing will sell specialty-wedding items, like cake servers and guest books. It's a Shore Thing will open in the GulfView Heights Business Center on County Road 30A, "hopefully" by Dec. Warwick and Stapleton are planning an official grand opening on Valentine's Day 2005.

During the rain, as the Thompson's exchanged vows, Stapleton added a special "Shore" thing touch. When she asked the traditional "Do you," she added, "Take this man/woman in sunshine or rain?"

The bride and groom happily said, "I do."

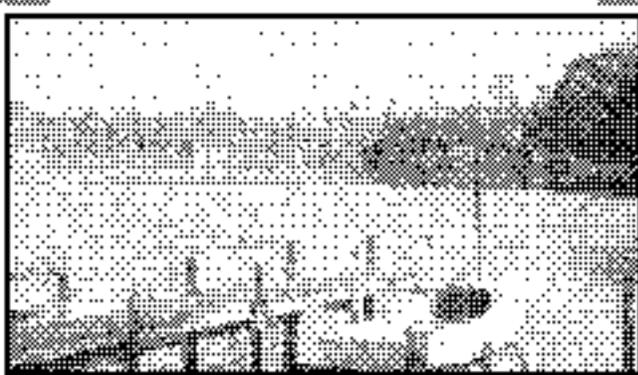
A doctor that makes house calls



Courtesy of Walton County Chamber of Commerce

A ribbon cutting was held on Nov. 5, at The Housecall Vet, in Miramar Beach. Jennifer Rotruck, DVM, provides veterinary care in the home. Owners and pets don't have to go anywhere! You can reach Dr. Rotruck at (850) 269-0642.

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