

BUENA VISTA'S JOE GREINER PROVES THAT, EVEN WHEN IT COMES TO RUNNING A WHITEWATER RAFTING BUSINESS, IT HELPS TO HAVE A MIND LIKE A COMPUTER.

Alongside America's whitewater capital, the Arkansas River, demand for commercial space outstrips supply. In Buena Vista and Johnson Village, several formerly abandoned gas stations and garages, no more than 1,000 square feet big, have been reconfigured to fit the needs of rafting companies. Turnover is high: Many of these buildings have been occupied by a different tenant every other year for the past decade.

Joe and Sue Greiner, owners of Wilderness Aware Inc., a rafting company based in Johnson Village, have seen many a competing enterprise come and go in their 17-year tenure in the area's whitewater industry. The couple has also seen the Arkansas emerge as the world's most popular whitewater rafting river, with nearly a quarter-million commercial user days in 1999, generating about \$22 mil-

WAVE OF THE FUTURE

lion in expenditures and \$56 million in total economic impact. (See sidebar, Whitewater Mania.)

Amid 62 companies with commercial rafting permits for the Arkansas, Wilderness Aware is a standout. "I don't want to dismiss the other 61, small or big," said Dave Taliaferro, U.S. Bureau of Land Management river manager in Buena Vista, "but they are one of our better ones. They run a good business. (Longevity) is the ingredient for Joe, 20 years of experience."

As the popularity of rafting has boomed, so has Wilderness Aware, growing more than 10-fold since the Greiners purchased it from founder William Alexander in 1985. Sue attributed the business' long-term success to her husband's "attention to detail ... There aren't many companies doing the sort of detail-oriented stuff that Joe is."

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PHOTOGRAPHY
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PHOTO BY COLORADO WHITEWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Raft captain Derek Steigemeier piloting a raft last month through the Zoom Floom rapid in the Arkansas River's Browns Canyon.

Joe's "Brown Book," an aged three-ring binder with a spine reinforced by duct tape, testifies to his attention to the smallest details. Two hundred pages cite every imaginable statistic relevant to Wilderness Aware's history, from customer comment card results (an astounding average of 4.74 out of 5, where 5 means "excellent," across 21 categories in '99) to the number of e-mails received (up 65%, to 6,644, in '99) to the amount of business originating in Colorado (36% in '99, down from 58% in '88).

After graduating from Colorado State University in 1983, Joe had his sights on a career as a forest ranger. "But Reagan got elected right before I graduated, so all the parks got cut," he remembered. "There were people with Master's degrees working for per diem wages, \$10 to \$15 a day."

Joe turned to summertime guiding for Wilderness Aware. During the winters from '83 to '85, he ski-bummed in Steamboat and guided canoes in the Everglades. The Greiners married in summer 1985 and bought the company a few months later.

"When we bought it, it was kind of a part-time summer thing," Joe described. Alexander "was taking about 600 people a year down." For its first four summers, the Greiners ran Wilderness Aware out of their 700-square-foot home in Buena Vista.

"Our bedroom, we moved everything out and put wetsuits in our closet. We packed our lunches in our kitchen, our backyard was our shop, and we stored boats at a friend's pasture about a mile away," Joe recalled.

After growing to 2,500 user days in 1989, Wilderness Aware moved to an

1,800-square-foot facility in Buena Vista, which the Greiners rented for four years before buying it in 1994. That year, for the first time, Joe and Sue spent their off-season focusing on the next summer rather than working a winter job. (Sue stopped working full-time in 1997 to raise their two kids, Ben, 7, and Ethan, 3. She now handles company bookkeeping from home.)

"We started out right out of college with a slow-growth philosophy," Joe said. "We borrowed for property, but not to grow the company. We've never borrowed for operations. We invest a few thousand a year, buy a boat every year."

The net result? Wilderness Aware now owns about \$250,000 worth of equipment, including 24 rafts, not to mention real estate.

Joe, Eric Young, director of operations, and Jody Werner, information sys-

tems manager, “have been able to really take it through that change from being small to being big and still keep it working.” Sue noted. “These guys have taken it from a small company where everybody knew everything to a big company where everybody knows what they need to know — and that’s not easy.”

In 1998, Wilderness Aware was “bursting at the seams” again, after a season of 9,500 user days. Thus, the

“When we bought the company in ’86, we got a DOS-based computer,” Joe explained. “Spreadsheets were a nightmare.” Four years ago, the company finally upgraded to Windows and started using IT to track everything in Joe’s Brown Book.

Today, the company is wired to the hilt, with seven networked computers. In the past, the season ended with three weeks spent processing comment cards, Werner said. Now, it’s an ongoing

FINDING, HIRING AND TRAINING

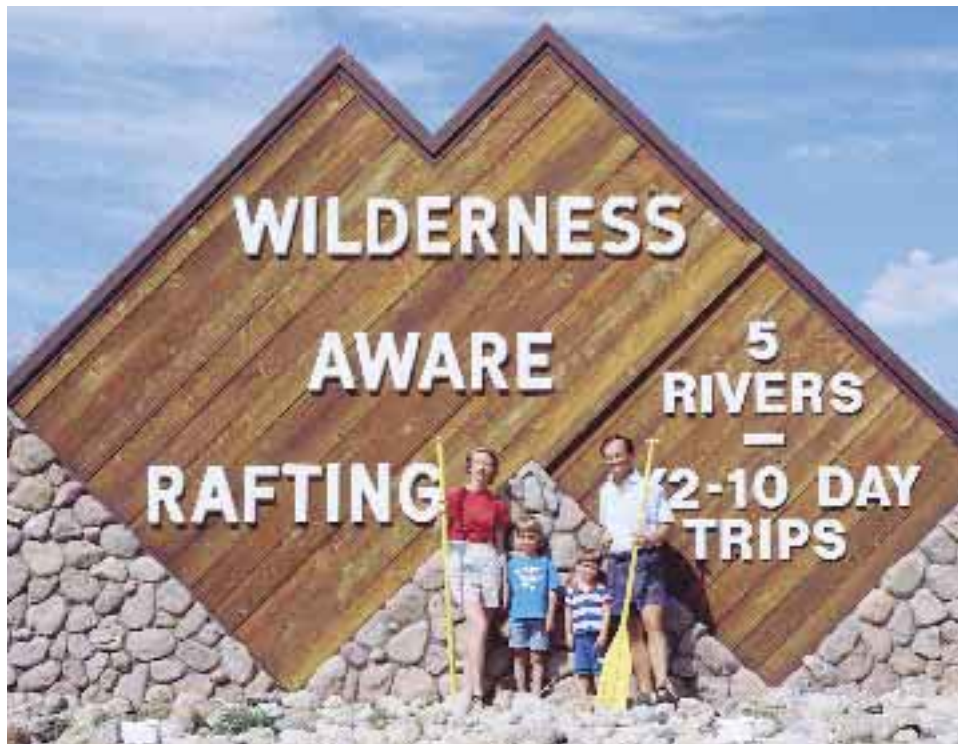
Every spring, potential Wilderness Aware guides pay \$275 to go on a five-day interview trip on the Big Bend River in Texas. The company hosts several such trips each year, generally hiring about 15 out of 40 candidates. These trips are a money-losing proposition, but they allow Wilderness Aware to get a first-hand look at the candidates’ abilities.

“We tend to hire very intelligent college students that need to do something with their degree,” Joe Greiner said, noting that the typical Wilderness Aware guide returns for about five summers. “What that gives us is a guide that can converse with the high-end customer.”

In mid-May, 30 Wilderness Aware guides, many of them rookies, reported to Johnson Village for three weeks of pre-season training. “Guide training, that’s a biggie,” said Sue Greiner. “We spend lots and lots and lots of time training those guides. Not only so they know the logistics and know when the stops are, but so they are very good with people. It just takes months.”

“The minimum requirement in Colorado (for training raft guides) is 50 hours, and we put in close to 400,” said Russell “Woody” Good, Wilderness Aware’s head trainer and 18-year company veteran. Wilderness Aware starts training, said Good, on the interview trip. “On day one, they know nothing. On day two, you’re already guiding. On day five, you know how to rig a boat, de-rig it, set up camp and move quickly.”

As housing has gotten tighter and costlier in the Buena Vista area, Joe and Sue have reacted to meet their employees’ needs. They bought a mobile home park in Buena Vista in ’95 to guarantee that their guides have a roof over their head, a move right in line with Joe’s usual attention to detail.



The Greiners at the entrance to their 17 acres on the Arkansas

company moved a second time, to its new state-of-the-art facility on 17 acres along the Arkansas. (Last season, the company tallied 10,000 customer days, or 8,267 customers.)

“This whole building is the result of attention to detail,” Joe said, noting that everything from the size and style of the bathrooms to the location of the water fountain was based on a scouting trip back East and reports from thousands of comment cards. Technology, he added, made in-depth analysis possible.

process. “We’re a lot more accurate,” she said. Wilderness Aware also went paperless two years ago, and installed a Windows-based reservations system.

About 60% of Wilderness Awarer’s 1999 business originated from day and half-day trips on the Arkansas. The other 40% came from multiday trips on the Arkansas, Gunnison, North Platte and Upper Colorado rivers. The BLM’s Taliaferro commended the Greiners’ multiday trips: Guests, he said, “really get in tune with the river.”

WHITEWATER MANIA

COMMERCIAL USER DAYS ON COLORADO'S RIVERS, 1990-2004

1990	286,471
1995	430,742
1999	526,897
2004 (Projected)	763,492

COMMERCIAL USER DAYS ON THE ARKANSAS, 1990-1999 (PERCENTAGE OF STATE TOTAL)

1990	157,380	(54.9%)
1995	199,109	(46.2%)
1999	243,709	(46.3%)

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COMMERCIAL RIVER RAFTING IN COLORADO, 1990-1999

1990	\$51,925,995
1995	\$89,548,883
1999	\$120,193,602

Source: Colorado River Outfitters Association.

In 1998, Wilderness Aware began offering a third kind of trip: multiday, inn-to-inn trips, where guests stay in riverfront bed-and-breakfasts instead of roughing it. Last year, user days for inn-to-inn trips grew 1,000%; Joe expects the trend to continue.

"A lot of the Arkansas River companies only operate on the Arkansas, so it becomes quite easy to run the Arkansas by memorizing it: a 'go left at this rock, go right at this rock' sort of thing," said Joe. Because Wilderness Aware offers trips on several Colorado rivers aside from the Arkansas, "We train more along the lines of teaching how to raft and react to things. It's called reading the river: Look at the shape of the river to figure out what's underneath."

In '93, Joe turned head guide duties over to Wilderness Aware Director of Operations Eric Young. "About seven years into it, I started losing interest in the guiding part," Joe said, "and warming up

WILDERNESS AWARE'S GROWTH

WILDERNESS AWARE USER DAYS, 1986-1999

1986	792
1990	2,682
1995	6,915
1999	9,177

WILDERNESS AWARE'S COLORADO MARKET SHARE, 1990-1999

1990	0.94%
1995	1.61%
1999	0.82%

Source: Wilderness Aware Inc.

RELEVANT URLS

Wilderness Aware Rafting: www.inaraft.com
Colorado River Outfitters: www.croa.org
Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area: http://parks.state.co.us/arkansas/

to the business part." In both environments, his ability to read and react has proved impeccable. An amazing 99% of last year's customers wrote on their comment cards that they would return to Wilderness Aware for future trips.

"Year in and year out, they provide very good service," said Doug Bruski, a Littleton resident who has gone on trips with Wilderness Aware the past five seasons. "They are very concerned with safety, and I like that, especially when I have one of my kids with me. They just seem to know what they're doing."

"It's not just about making money and taking more people than everybody else down the river," said Sue Greiner. "There's more to it than that. Having a really, really good experience makes a difference in (guests') lives, and shows them the outdoors and makes them feel good about it. That whole thing is important, too." 