



NEWS

Where they were, where they are: local Kawartha businesses reflect on COVID-19

The community saw businesses struggle, innovate and rally amid shutdowns and never-before-seen health protocols

By Sarah Sobanski Kawartha Lakes This Week
Friday, December 25, 2020

In 2020, the community saw businesses struggle, innovate and rally amid shutdowns and never-before-seen health protocols such as social distancing. Businesses across all industries were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – Kawartha Lakes was no exception.

Kawartha Lakes This Week caught up with a few of these business to see how they're

doing 10 months later:

Dvine Laboratories

[Dvine Laboratories](#), [Whitney Plastics](#) and [Sunspace](#) were among the first Lindsay businesses to retool to support the country's COVID-19 supply shortage. [Dvine Laboratories started producing hand sanitizer](#), [Whitney Plastics invested in manufacturing face shields](#) and [Sunspace designed hygiene shields and pop-up isolation pods](#).

Mike Meathrel, president of Dvine, said his business is one of the lucky ones that has been able to flourish during the pandemic. Though business has slowed since the first wave peaked in the summer, there is still a steady demand for their product.

"It's allowed the team to rethink what we can do as a company," Meathrel said, noting staff had "gone above and beyond." He added 80 per cent of the revenues from producing more than 1 million bottles of hand sanitizer over the last 10 months have gone back into building the business.

"We have a lot more opportunity walking into 2021 than we ever had in the history of the company," he said. The company will look to bottle antiseptic sprays and glass cleaners in the new year as it continues with hand sanitizer and e-liquids.

It's also continuing to support local not-for-profits with donations. Around 15,000 bottles of hand sanitizer have gone to Kawartha Food Source alone. He noted any not-for-profit needing hand sanitizer just has to ask.

Whitney Plastics

Dale Schumacher, president of Whitney Plastics, didn't see his face shields take off quite as much as Dvine saw its hand sanitizer take off. He estimated Whitney Plastic could now produce 100,000 shields a week if it needed to, but those contracts have been given to other businesses.

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"On the bright side, it was a big learning curve for us," he said, noting he found his

competitors were also his friends as businesses rallied to support supply shortages together. "It didn't take off, but I'm still happy with what we did."

[Whitney Plastics was first-runner up at the Canadian Manufacturing, PLANT "Responding to COVID-19" Industry Leadership Honours virtual gala in personal protective equipment - small manufacturer.](#)

It still sells and donates masks to local places that need them, such as correctional facilities and long-term care homes. Schumacher said he's looking at selling the shields on major online platforms in the future.

"This isn't going to go away. I'm very proud when I go down Kent Street in Lindsay and see two elderly people wearing my masks," he said. "It tugs on my heart."

Whitney Plastics has been in business for 60 years. If nothing else, Schumacher says the pandemic showed him the business can survive anything — that's a good feeling.

Sunspace

For Steven Hunt, the fact that the country didn't need his medical isolation pods is a blessing in disguise. Hunt developed the pods when COVID-19 first hit, but only ever got around to installing one, and it was never used.

"I don't think it got to that critical level where they required the extra beds," he said. His hygiene shields, on the other hand, were a hit.

"We started building those right away, the weekend after we went on lockdown," he said. Orders peaked during reopening, but have slowed again. Hunt said masks have grown into the mainstay of the pandemic in place of shields.

Where things have taken off are in Sunspace's sunrooms and renovations side. Hunt estimates the increase at around 30 per cent and his wait times have doubled. He said people have more time and money for their homes without paying for their kids to be in sports, travelling and working remotely.

"I expect 2021 will be equally as strong when it comes to people and their homes," he said, noting the pandemic backlog has taken the seasonality out of his business for the time being. That means he'll be able to keep his staff on longer, and have more skilled workers heading into next year.

South Pond Farms

[South Pond Farms](#) flipped from a popular wedding locale to taking grocery orders

and participating in [Kendal Hills Farm's virtual farmers market](#) in the span of a few short weeks.

[When Kawartha Lakes This Week](#) last spoke with Danielle French, owner, she discussed the pandemic shifting peoples' shopping habits to the local food supply chain — as products such as meats became more expensive and harder to find — and possibly hosting cooking classes focusing on education for wholesale livestock from farmers — a whole chicken, for example.

A season later, French said she's pushed the cooking classes idea down the road a bit as she's focused on creating a more robust website and collaborating with local businesses.

"Definitely there's a new structure of my business that will always be there," she said, adding she'd like to start doing events and classes again when the pandemic is over.

French said her business has taken a hit financially, but the pandemic has put her back in touch with the more important aspects of her business. "I feel that's been a really good thing," she said.

Lunar Rhythm Gardens

Jessica Foote, owner of [Lunar Rhythm Gardens](#), was among [five farms in Kawartha Lakes that were heading into their busy seasons short-handed last spring](#). Her migrant workers were stalled at the border due to COVID-19. She'd also began on-farm, mini-markets and online sales to keep working as farmers markets shut down. She'd hired packing staff for produce, and a Canadian crew on the fly.

"It's been a lot more work," she said, though her workers did manage to get to the farm. They've returned safely to their southern families now that the season is over.

Foote said she expects the farm managed to keep most of its customers through the mini-markets and ended up having a near regular year financially, despite crop failures caused by the summer's 60-day drought. Lunar saw more sales, but also had higher labour costs.

Over the course of the year, Foote said the farm managed to improve its processes and become more efficient in its new normal such as how it packs orders. She said she would like to go back to farmers markets next season, but will likely do so while

continuing on-farm pickup.

“We’re resilient if nothing else,” she said.

Boiling Over’s Coffee Vault

Laura LeMiere, an owner of [Boiling Over’s Coffee Vault](#), was one business owner who innovated for online to survive COVID-19.

[After revamping their online store, adding online orders, the coffee shop reopened in June.](#) Since then, LeMiere said it's been "all about riding the wave of what we're allowed to do, and not do."

The store now offers socially distanced seating and even managed to host a few of its live music nights. The musicians sold tickets directly to their fan bases — a private show. Boiling Over accommodated patrons at their seats instead of at the counter, and set up a hygiene shield between them and the musicians.

LeMiere said the pandemic forced Boiling Over to innovate in ways it may never have unless it had to — such as online. The coffee shop hasn’t seen the same return financially, she admitted, but it’s been an amazing year for building partnerships with other local businesses, and relationships with customers.

Boiling Over is offering more local products than ever as people focus more on shopping local and local retailers look for more ways to offer their products, she said. "It does feel like there's a light at the end of the tunnel right now," she added.

Lindsay Drive In

[The Lindsay Drive In was one of many seasonal businesses in Kawartha Lakes that waited anxiously for the green-light as pandemic shutdowns cut into their busy seasons.](#)

Dan Zita, owner, had the extra challenge of needing something to show as new movie releases were postponed. COVID-19 protocols also restricted him from opening concessions — where he said he made his money.

“I think under the circumstances, it was phenomenal,” he said, reflecting on the year despite a late opening.

The drive in showed retro movies and offered live shows on a newly built stage where patrons could see live musicians while remaining safely in their vehicles.

“The people that did come out; everybody left satisfied, because they hadn’t seen anything like this before,” he said. “People showed a lot of gratitude for us being open... and we didn’t have any issues, everyone was well-behaved.”

Zita said he’s nicknamed the stage the “Lindsay Bowl” after the Hollywood Bowl. He said the stage is permanent and he’s looking forward to hosting live shows next year with a little more time to plan.

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