

Home Again

Karen's Catskill Mountain House

by Dianne Krulick

Many local residents who leave after graduating school return to the area to either start a new business or join a family-run business. The reasons are varied, though the pull is great.

After many years of working for others, **Karen Leitstein** decided that she loved the hotel business, but wanted to begin one on her own, where she could have a personal touch in the design and running of her special lodging establishment. This decision brought her back home to Napanoch when she opened the **Catskill Mountain House**, her former home, to guests in the fall of 2000.

After her 1978 graduation from *Ellenville High School*, she attended college in Long Island, earning a Liberal Arts degree. She decided to seek a warmer climate in Florida and worked at the world-famous Fontainebleu Hilton as a cocktail waitress at the pool, and as a restaurant hostess. The president of the Hilton Hotel group recommended that she go to school to pursue training in hotel management. Sullivan County Community College, with its outstanding Culinary Arts program, was her choice for this change in her career. During her time there, she became active in the Hotel Sales and Marketing Program, a national student association, serving as president. After attending the national convention, which was paid for by the SCCC local group, she decided to continue her education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, with a degree in Hotel Administration. While in Las Vegas, she worked for more than two years at Caesar's Palace in the Room Service Department, setting up, delivering, and serving to hotel guests.

Karen decided to return to the quiet of Ulster County, teaching at the Culinary and for *Ulster County BOCES*. After spending two winters back in the area, she moved to the warmth of Florida, managing, catering, bartending, and running the front desk of a boutique hotel, the LaVoile Rouge (now the Savoy) in South Beach.

Moving from place to place, and working in many different hotel establishments, was based on advice she received while at SCCC. A former professor told her that she should work as many places as she could and get as much experience as possible. She took this advice very seriously.

After hearing that *HITS* was coming to the Ellenville area and there would be need for more accommodations in the area, she decided to return home again. She renovated her family-owned home, the former *Engelside Valley Inn* of the 1860s, to a Bed & Breakfast (B&B) establishment with many tastefully designed rooms for guests. She joined the Chambers of Commerce of the area (*Ellenville/WawarsingCoC*, New Paltz, Ulster County) and the *Ulster County B&B Alliance*.

For the past four years, visitors from throughout the continental United States, and from many countries (Australia, China, Japan, and England, to name a few) have stayed in her B&B in Napanoch. **Shawangunk Mountain** hikers and climbers find the B&B to be a special place to relax while in the area. Many of her guests have returned to the special environment of the B&B.

She has also hosted many well-known people, including TV reporter Soledad O'Brien. Broadway stars and directors, film stars, and members of the TV industry



have found their way to the B&B. She recommends that guests visit the local area attractions, including **Sam's Point**, *Shadowland Theatre*, and local restaurants. Lisa Ferraro, an actress who has performed in numerous *Shadowland* productions, and her family spent the weekend of her wedding at the B&B, enjoying a special brunch on Sunday following her wedding at the **Stone Church** in Cragmoor.

Karen continues with her association at SCCC, volunteering for charity functions, and maintains close ties as an alumnus. She never forgets the advice from her professors there and is happy to have returned home. For more info, contact **Catskill Mountain House**, at **44 Continental Rd., Napanoch NY 12458, 647-4288**, or **info@catskillmountainhouse.com**, or visit: **www.catskillmountainhouse.com**



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