

Shank's Mare Outfitters, now closing, served Lancaster County for 45 years

By: Ann Rejrat

Published: LNP | LancasterOnline

Nov. 25, 2023

WRIGHTSVILLE – About 20 people set off from Shank's Mare Outfitters, kayaking on a hot, humid, sunny July day in 2012, a summer day like most others.

But as the group paddled across the Susquehanna River down through the Conejohela Flats, the sky started to darken. The private group that booked a Paddle and Dine adventure decided not to turn back, though, said Randy Blasdell, 63, of West Hempfield Township, who was in the group.

The sky got darker. Winds picked up. Thunder boomed clearly.

Shank's Mare guides, Steve and Devin Winand, herded the group and their kayaks into a cove on an island just in time for the rain to start falling. The storm lasted about 10 minutes.

"It was a little bit scary, but also really exciting, and we knew that Steve and Devin would watch out for us," Blasdell said.

When the storm passed, the group made their way back toward Shank's Mare, paddling directly under a double rainbow.

It was a paddle that Blasdell said he would never forget. It was also one that he would never have experienced if not for the Winands, the owners of Shank's Mare.

"Just have extreme gratitude for them helping us to safely navigate the river and do things that we really wanted to," said Blasdell's wife, Kris, 59. "We wouldn't have done it without them."

But after 45 years in business, sharing their expertise as guides with generations of outdoors enthusiasts, Steve and Liz Winand are hanging up their oars, at least professionally. They still plan to spend a lot of time recreating outdoors. But they are stepping away from the shop that has introduced many in Lancaster County and York County to outdoor sports and activities.

To go on one's own legs

Shank's Mare Outfitters occupies a former 1880s general store in Wrightsville on the bank of the Susquehanna, the fourth location for the store since its 1978 start in downtown York. The retail shop will close, but the plan is for the Lower Susquehanna River Keepers to take over the building and the programming.

Shank's Mare's name comes from an old Scottish saying meaning "to use one's own legs to travel" – a fitting term for a shop that outfitted people for outdoor activities beyond kayaking, such as hiking and cross country skiing.

"My father and grandfather, when I was small, if I wanted to go somewhere, they would say, 'Sure shank's mare,' which meant walk," Steve Winand, 74, said.

The Winands always enjoyed the outdoors and saw a need for an outdoors outfitter in the region when they started the company, a decision Steve Winand accredits to being “young and dumb.”

The company has adapted to new outdoor recreation trends throughout the decades, growing from activities like canoeing to kayaking, said 73-year-old Liz Winand.

Shank’s Mare always had the attitude of aiming to do tours and educate people on the outdoors. Even when they were in downtown York, they would host activities on the river, Steve said.

But the shift in the late 1990s to the Wrightsville location positioned them to expand and better serve Lancaster County residents.

“Even though we started in York, our location here has definitely equally served Lancaster clientele,” Liz said.

Lancaster Township resident Patricia Larish, 69, went to Shank’s Mare in 2007 when she was first interested in kayaking. Larish is retired and serves on the board for the Lower Susquehanna River Keepers, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the ecological health of the Lower Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay.

“Their love of the river itself and the paddle trips they provided, it just opened the door for me beautifully,” Larish, said

One of her favorite paddles is the Lock 15 paddle she has done with the Winands. Lock 15, in York County, refers to the device, or lock, used for raising or lowering boats between stretches of water and is a remnant from the old canal trade in the area.

“It's a part of the river that I would not have ventured on by myself, and that was probably one of the first ones I went on,” Larish said.

Looking back

Shank's Mare has run trips to locations such as the Outer Banks or Florida. The Winands spent time getting to know participants in close corridors – living under the same roof and eating at the same table. Steve, Liz, and their son Devin said that they will miss the people.

“You just got to know a lot of nice, interesting people doing all the different activities,” Steve said.

More than one couple met through Shank's Mare and married, Liz said.

For her, one of the best parts of their business was helping single women who were hesitant to try outdoor activities. Sometimes women were scared about being able to do the activity or staying safe, but Liz said that hearing the person come back saying “thank you” always meant so much to her. Knowing that Shank's Mare provided a space for single females to enjoy the outdoors is a wonderful feeling, Liz said.

However, their business was not always smooth sailing.

“Forty-five years as a small business, there are a lot of failures,” Liz said. “You just have to be willing to pick yourself up and say, ‘OK, well, we know that's not going to work. Let's start thinking outside of the box and figure out what will,’ and you have to do that over and over and over and over again.”

In addition to adjusting to COVID-19 like many small businesses, Liz said, the weather in 2018 led to a large amount of weekend trip cancellations, during a summer that seemed to constantly rain. She estimated 80% of their programming probably had to be canceled that year.

“You know, we're like farmers, we live by the weather,” Liz said.

“The best finale”

Liz and Steve Winand live two miles up the road from the shop on the river. Liz's family has a summer place in Cooperstown, New York, near where the Susquehanna River starts, and the Winands have had a sailboat in the Chesapeake Bay – where the river ends – for a number of years. The river is a part of their DNA, they said, and an aspect of their lives that none of them plan on losing.

Devin is the sixth generation in the family to live, work or play on the Susquehanna River, he said. It was up to Devin whether he wanted to take over the business, and he ultimately decided to step away from the shop aspect. He plans to be involved with the educational programming through the River Keeper's Society.

His parents, meanwhile, are looking forward to their retirement and spending some more time inevitably outdoors – this time without the connection to work.

“We've got a travel trailer; we're going to be headed out and try to stay off the main paths,” Steve said.

The store has started having clearance sales to sell off the inventory. While no official closing date has been set, the Winands are hoping to have everything sold off and finalized by the end of the year.

If everything lines up with preserving the educational programs and the building, as it looks it is going to, the Winands are excited for the future.

"I think it will be the best finale," Steve said of the plans for preserving the building and the educational programs.