By Gwen Fontenot

Eunice native Kelli Soileau never aspired to be in the restaurant business. She exclaims, “I really had no interest in the restaurant business at all.” After graduating from Eunice High School in 2007, Kelli did what many area high school graduates do; she started college at LSU-Eunice. She wanted to pursue a career in the medical field. The daughter of Vanessa Soileau and the late Jesse Layne Soileau, Kelli planned to obtain an Associate of Science degree at LSU-Eunice and then decide where to go from there.

Like many college students, in the spring of 2008, Kelli happened upon a part-time job when some of her family members acquired a restaurant in Evangeline Parish—the Crawfish Barn in Vidrine. Kelli’s step-father Frank Messina from Houston had just retired from owning and operating four successful Cajun-themed restaurants.
in Houston and had moved to Louisiana. Frank teamed up with Kelli’s brother Travis Soileau of Eunice and her brother-in-law Saul Duos of Vidrine to become owners of the Crawfish Barn. As you might expect, it takes a lot of hard work and teamwork to keep a business going. Being a close knit family, everyone in the family pitched in to help with this new endeavor. And that’s where Kelli came into the picture.

While Kelli was eager to help her family in the restaurant business, she also had other responsibilities as a student and student athlete. As a member of the LSU-E softball team, Kelli had an exciting yet busy year. In addition to working at the restaurant and doing her regular school work, she was traveling around the country with the softball team and even played on the team that went to the national playoffs!

Little did Kelli realize that while she was pursuing her degree at LSU-E and working part-time at the Crawfish Barn, she was actually preparing herself
for a whole new career. You might say she was attending the school of hard knocks. Kelli worked with her family helping them remodel the building, create menus, set up tables, operate the kitchen, and do anything that needed to be done. She was also instrumental in getting Cajun bands to provide live entertainment at the restaurant.

Kelli remembers those not too distant times saying “When I got thrown into the kitchen I had no idea what I was doing. It was a nightmare.”

The young entrepreneur proudly proclaims, “I finding and keeping good employees. It is important to this business owner to
As do many of the employees at the Crawfish Barn, Sarah Mahavier wears many hats, seen here taking to-go orders and checking out customers. Photo by: Gwen Fontenot

As an entrepreneur, Kelli responded “I do it for myself. Everything you do and every action you take reflects on you. ... I like having to do everything myself instead of working for someone else. I like pleasing people and that’s one way you can definitely do it is in a restaurant.” Kelli is attuned to the fact that The Crawfish Barn has significant ties to the Vidrine community. She is continually seeking information about the history of the 70-plus year old barn (yes, it was actually a functioning agricultural barn).

Kelli hires local individuals, and she does employs children of some of her regular customers. She also has a loyal group of friends who support her and work with her in various capacities.

“I couldn’t do it without all the loyal employees. You can’t run a restaurant by yourself,” says Kelli. When asked about her favorite part of being

The Crawfish Barn located at 1789 Mayeauxville Road (off of Tiger Lane) in Vidrine is open Tuesday through Thursday from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. and Friday and Saturday from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Live entertainment will be provided again during crawfish season.
Photos by: Gwen Fontenot
originally built to store grain and farm equipment for the family of John LaHaye and converted to a restaurant by grandson Johnny LaHaye in 1992. She appreciates and is proud to display numerous antique farm items left in the barn as well as items that were used in some of the LaHaye family businesses. She explains that she was told that

"She appreciates and is proud to display numerous antique farm items left in the barn."

The decor within the Crawfish Barn is just as warm and inviting as the food served.

Photo by Gwen Fontenot
Kelli Soileau has turned her sewing hobby into a part of her entrepreneurial venture by making and selling pillow-case style dresses for girls.

"these items are part of the community and should always remain as part of the business." She goes on to say that "everybody has their memories of the barn and likes to come here for those reasons."

It is clear that Kelli misses the time she was accustomed to spending with brothers Jessee and Layne, sister Kayce, mother Vanessa, and step-father Frank and the entire extended family. She explains that this is the most difficult part of owning her own business saying, "The hours, being here all the time, not being able to be with my family and friends all the time [are difficult]. But, it will be worth it in the long run." Even at her young age she understands the importance of being hands on. She likens it to "letting someone run your own house if you aren't there." It seems that for this eager and ambitious young lady it is just another challenge. She works hard to maintain regular visitation with her niece and nephew and spends as much time as possible babysitting them. She also cherishes her days off so she can get together with everyone for family meals.

Kelli continues to learn and implement new
Owner Kelli Soileau and her sister Kayce Duos painted this mural to pay tribute to the local community and the original use of the barn in which The Crawfish Barn restaurant is housed. Photo by: Gwen Fontenot

practices to make the restaurant even better. Just this year she installed a Point of Sale system to help kitchen staff be more efficient and to improve the overall quality of service. She is keenly aware of the need for consistent quality of food and customer service. She explains, “The food has improved a lot since I’ve taken over. That’s my main concentration. I want everything to come out right and as fast as it can.”

You would think that with all of this responsibility Kelli wouldn’t have time for anything else. But, much to my surprise, when asked about hobbies, she named several! One in particular stood out as Kelli pointed to an assortment of girls’ dresses on display in the restaurant. She loves to sew! She and sister Kayce make what she calls traditional “pillow case” style dresses and she makes traditional Mardi Gras costumes as well. I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that as she will be inundated with orders and need to start another business just for that!

Kelli doesn’t plan to let the dust settle under her feet. She plans to get this restaurant running on its own and someday open another one somewhere else by buying an old building with its own unique character and remodeling it.

FROM OUR READERS

Dear Dauna,