

# SOUTH WHIDBEY

## Women in Business

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### Metamorphosis: Where did you leave that 250-pound cocoon, Shirley?



Matt Johnson / The Record

*No longer a big sampler of the wares at her Clinton kitchen, Shirley's D5s owner Shirley Wilson has a new lease on life thanks to some changes she's made in the past year.*

*Weight loss and a new career direction buoy this restaurateur*

**By SHERRY MAYS**  
*Special to The Record*

Some people want to lose a few pounds for the holidays. For others, it may be the last 20 pounds before summer swimsuit season.

But how would you feel if you dropped down to a smaller size than what you were in high school? Or if you dropped 250 pounds in one year?

That's Shirley Wilson's story and she's sticking with it. It's easy to see why. This now-petite woman, owner of Shirley's Kitchen on the Clinton ferry dock, went from a size 24 to a size 6 in just 12 months, and couldn't feel healthier if she tried.

"I used to drink a 12-pack of Pepsi every day, and I ate bags of chocolate," she said. "Before my surgery I was borderline diabetic and had extremely high blood pressure. Today I don't take any meds, and I feel great."

What did she change? After witnessing her sister's controversial gastric bypass surgery, Wilson got on the computer to begin searching out alternatives. She found one — an adjustable silicone gastric band, known as the Lap Band.

"It was less invasive and it's adjustable," she said. "I couldn't feel better. If I had to do it all again, I would."

That's saying a lot when you consider Wilson took a second mortgage out to finance the surgery. She decided to take control of her health, and even opted for more expensive care in Washington rather than heading to Mexico for the procedure, which would have cut the costs in half.

Growing up back in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., Wilson never envisioned having the courage to do what she is doing today, which is owning a business. With an eighth-grade education, Wilson didn't think achieving was something she could strive for until a college administrator gave her the courage by assigning her the responsibility of designing and teaching a course for displaced homemakers.

"I taught five classes," Wilson said. "Who would have thought I would be doing that? I didn't. It was such a boost of confidence. That woman was so inspirational and positive, there wasn't any way I would have let her down."

Wilson only left her teaching job at Alaska Pacific University because the pay was a little low, but she would have stayed on if she could have supported her three children and herself on the compensation.

While in Alaska, she was in a bad car accident that sent her into surgery twice. After the second surgery, she opted to head to Whidbey Island to recuperate. She hasn't left for any great amount of time since.

"One of my greatest Whidbey experiences was living in the old historic Bush Point building," she said. "It took getting used to especially since it swayed in the wind, but I loved that place."

While working several part-time jobs, Wilson gutted a motor home and turned it into a mobile kitchen so she could motor to the best festivals and fishing holes on the island. Seventeen years ago, she opened Shirley's Kitchen, eventually finding a new home, and new kitchen, at the ferry dock. This move wasn't without trials, however. Due to dock renovations, the Kitchen was closed for 14 months, which almost buried her financially. Supportive customers and public officials fought to get her kitchen reopened, and a group of dedicated Shirley's Kitchen customers donated supplies and construction time to rebuild her kitchen when the state decided not to grandfather her structure into the new dock.

She took more than four jobs during that long period, which taught her a valuable lesson — not to put all your eggs in one basket. She is back to school these days, seeking her bachelors degree in human services management through the University of Phoenix. "I went back to school because I know the state could come back any time and shut me down again if they want to do more construction," she said. "This way I'll be able to make a decent living and be more competitive if it should ever happen."

For now, though, Wilson said she is committed to providing a "really good service for the community" with her kitchen operation on the dock. "I feel guilty if I'm closed," she said. "Without the support of my friends and customers, I wouldn't be here today."