JOAN’S DREAM

BY KEVIN MILLER

Not far from the modest but well-appointed office Joan Austin keeps on the Newberg campus of A-dec, the giant dental equipment company she and her husband Ken founded in 1964, the matriarch of one of OSU’s best-known and most generous families is watching a dream come true in a grand way.

Just up the hill, nestled between the edge of town and a vineyard, is The Allison Inn, billed as “the Oregon wine country’s premier inn and spa.” The four-story, 85-room, 155,000-square-foot resort features luxurious rooms and suites, a large, spa with swimming pool and 12 treatment rooms, and a restaurant, Jory, intended to be world-class. Prices for rooms start at around $300 a night and rise past $1,000, which means The Allison will compete with the finest hotels in the state.

The Allison is quite a bit grander, in every way, than the small country inn Joan (pronounced “Jo-Anne”) Austin envisioned many years ago for the site overlooking her hometown. “Dreams have a way of growing,” she said. “Even when you put them away for a while, they can grow.”

She did not graduate from college, but if anyone is a Beaver by immersion, it’s Joan Austin. Husband Ken is a 1953 engineering graduate and inventor who once prowled the OSU sidelines in a Benny Beaver costume. All of their children and their children’s spouses are OSU alumni: son G. Kenneth Austin III, graduated in 1977 in business administration; his wife, Celia Strickland Austin, is a 1976 graduate in home economics; daughter Loni Austin Parrish is a 1981 alumna in liberal arts; and Loni’s husband, Scott Parrish, graduated in 1981 with a degree in business administration.

Down to the smallest details, Joan Austin and other family members have had a hand in almost everything at The Allison. With advice from experts in high-end hospitality, she has selected lamps, fabrics, wall coverings, wood trim and myriad other materials, all with the goal of making the resort luxurious, comfortable and at peace with the land on which it sits.

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Its architecture is intended to make the building blend into the hillside, and that’s helped by the large amount of stone and glass used in construction. The local emphasis will extend to the art on the walls, most of which will be original work by locals, and will include a massive “soilscape painting” by OSU soil scientist and artist Jay Stratton Noller.

For those who know the Austins for the prodigious volunteer time and many millions they’ve given to OSU over the years...
(the Austin Entrepreneurship Program, the Austin Auditorium in the LaSells Stewart Center, the Austin Family Business Program, etc.) or for their decades of large-scale generosity in and around Newberg — to bad-mouth them in downtown Newberg would be to risk getting punched in the nose — it might seem odd that they are going into the luxury hotel business.

But it doesn’t seem so, Joan Austin said, if one goes back to the beginning.

The idea was born many years ago, after she and her husband helped start a substance abuse treatment center on their property. It bothered Joan that when family members of the people in the center came to Newberg to visit loved ones during their treatment, there was no nice place for them to stay nearby. She wanted to build a small guesthouse or country inn within walking distance, so the Austins secured the necessary land-use changes for a parcel on the nearby hillside.

One thing led to another and the country inn was never built. (The Austins no longer operate the treatment center, but it is alive and well and known as Hazelden Springbrook.)

The country inn idea arose again more recently with the growth of wine-related tourism in the area. Joan was frustrated that well-to-do tourists visiting the wine country a place so nice that they are compelled to stay and relax, perhaps taking day trips to tour area vineyards.

Ken Austin is careful to point out that his wife’s efforts were key to A-dec’s rise to world leadership in the dental equipment field, and that her encouragement and patience have always been crucial to his personal success. The Allison is the first large-scale family project that has been so much hers, and he is happily cheering her along from the sidelines.

“This is my doing,” she said, smiling. “He didn’t have an interest in it.”

Oregon State’s connection to the inn remains strong right down to its namesakes, the Ice Age’s Lake Allison, and Ira S. Allison, the OSU geologist who first hypothesized its existence.

For decades starting in the 1930s, Oregon State’s connection to the area was left with some of the most fertile soil in the world. Joan Austin is already working with OSU to bring university experts to the inn to offer seminars for guests, teaching them about the Oregon wine industry, and about the natural history behind The Allison’s name.

The resort will be as energy-efficient as possible, with a living “green” roof over part of it, and photovoltaic cells on another part, generating about 8 percent of the energy used on the site.

Eventually the Austins plan to build a large housing development on the flat area below the inn, known as Springbrook, but that will wait until the economy turns around, Joan Austin said.

If guests at The Allison Inn & Spa have as much fun staying at the hotel as Joan Austin and other family members are having as they help design and furnish it, the new resort in Oregon’s wine country will be a great success.

PHOTO BY DENNIS WOLVERTON

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**25**

miles from downtown Portland to The Allison

**1,575**

square feet in the premier grand suite, with two bedrooms and a large entertaining area, complete with "butler’s kitchen"

**12**

treatment rooms in the 15,000-square-foot spa

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The family’s plans for the area have drawn praise from environmentalists because the development remains within Newberg’s urban growth boundary and does not encroach on agricultural land.

Meanwhile, pre-opening praise has rolled in from the national hospitality press, as have pre-opening bookings, said Laura Crugnale, the property’s director of sales. In June, a preliminary job fair to start filling the inn’s staff — appropriately held at Newberg’s Joan Austin Elementary School — drew more than 1,000 applicants for 160 positions.

As for the Austin matriarch and president of The Allison Inn & Spa, she is eager to see how well her once-modest dream turned grand reality is received.

“It just grew,” she said. “It’s been a lot of fun.”