

New lifestyle isn't ex-politician's last resort—it's his first

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Over on the west side of Lake Mille
Lacs, just off Hwy. 169, John Drew
enjoys a slice of the good life.

With his wife, Mary, and a boisterous
son, Ron Maddox, the 48-year-old
former St. Paul City Council member
owns a resort called the Rainbow Inn,
a tiny, cozy place where the rooms

are clean, the bait is cheap and the
beer runs cold.

It's a simple life style filled with long
hours and hard work. But to a mild-
mannered guy who once made a living
in the uncertain and demanding
world of politics, it's solid and steady
and much more rewarding.

"Mary and I always talked about it,
even when I was in politics," Drew
said the other morning as he gazed

across Mille Lacs while standing in
his front yard. "One of our ambitions
was to move out in a small commu-
nity, find a business and run it. A lot
of people talk about it, but some-
times, it's tough to do something
about it."

For Drew, a smiling, personable fel-
low considered by former City Hall
colleagues as one of the truly nice
guys in politics, the slow, sweet life at
the Rainbow didn't come easily.

Eighteen months ago Drew suffered a
near-fatal heart attack after climbing
six flights of stairs to his City Hall
office. For weeks afterward, his pulse
raced and his health was poor.

Complicating the recovery was the
fact Drew had no job. A week before
the heart attack, the former state leg-
islator and two-time City Council
member from Highland Park lost his
council seat by 178 votes to Bob
Long.

At 47, after nearly a decade of poli-
tics, Drew was unemployed and near-
ly unemployable.

"We talked about it a lot," Mary
Drew said, nodding at her husband.
"John's health was bad, his job was
over and we just needed a change.
We felt it was time to start-over and
start fresh."

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Last May, with the help of Maddox, another former St. Paul council member with heart problems, Drew put down money on the Rainbow. They bought a few boats, hired some guides, and by the time the 1988 fishing season opened the longtime city slickers were in the resort business.

"I was really scared, and John was scared too," Mary Drew said. "You're leaving your friends, you're leaving your job, you're leaving your home. We wondered if we were doing the right thing.

"But I remember one night before we moved, we were sitting there arguing back and forth, and John said, 'Remember that saying about taking the road that's less traveled?' And I thought, 'You're right.' So we decided to do it."

The Drews sold their Highland Park home last summer and moved north with their children, Stephanie, 15, and Kevin, 11. Although they had some early doubts, they say they've had no regrets.

Running the resort is probably harder than politics, Drew said, "but you can regulate your hours. It's different."

The Drews live in a house attached to the bar and bait shop and run five cottages and an eight-room motel on four acres, just across the road from the lake. They share cleaning, painting and bartending duties, often taking turns working late-night shifts.

There's nothing fancy about the Rainbow, but it's warm and comfortable and everybody's welcome. Every Friday night, before the guests arrive, the Drews open a bottle of wine and sit on the front porch waiting to check folks in.

"It's a big deal," Drew said. "You get kind of excited."

Mary Drew said the inn got its name from the rainbows that frequently stretch for miles across the lake. The story goes that when the storms blow in from the east, they leave clean and clear color lines in the skies of Wigwam Bay.

"You should of been up here yesterday," John Drew said, gazing at the horizon. "We must have had three inches of rain up here. It just poured. When it was over, there was a pure, beautiful double rainbow right out there in the bay. First one I've ever seen. It started in the other horizon, as far away as you could see. It was something."

The beauty of the place can overwhelm you, he said. "Last winter I was out about 5 miles on the ice

during a full moon. The whole lake lights up and you feel like you're on top of the arctic. You can see for miles."

He smiles. He seems happy.

He's tan and trim from long hours outdoors and lives his life in blue jeans, T-shirts and paint-splotted tennis shoes. In the past year he's worn a suit and tie just once, for a family funeral.

He's dropped about 15 pounds since moving north, and although he's still taking medication for his heart condition, says he feels strong.

If Drew misses politics, he doesn't let on. He said he's too busy to think about the past — peddling leeches and minnows, cutting grass, booking guests or cruising the lake with busloads of Onamia schoolkids.

When they need help, the Drews and Maddox look to each other.

"If it wasn't for Ron, I certainly wouldn't be here, I know that," said Drew, who plans to buy out Maddox's share of the Rainbow.

Said Maddox, who splits time working in St. Paul and running another resort about a half-mile south of the Rainbow, "I think this experience has taught John not to take himself too seriously, that there are more important things in life. He knows now that he can do something he's never done before and do it well. It's the same thing with Mary. They've just done a good job."

Drew admits to missing his friends and some of his political colleagues. He asks about them all, and smiles at the memories.

On the wall behind the bar is a photograph of Drew shaking hands with George Bush, who at the time the picture was taken was vice president. It went up, Mary Drew said, sometime after the November election.

"Of course, he shows it to everybody who comes in," she said.

Often it starts conversation, she said. Sometimes that's good, sometimes it's not.

"I never realized how many people despise politicians," John Drew said. "When you're in politics, they don't say anything. But when you're out, they don't hold back."