

[Home](#) > [People](#) > [Point Pleasant Beach](#)

Point Beach's Smith teaching New Jersey how to use Facebook, Twitter & an oven

By Erica Florentine

Blogger Deborah Smith, 43, is addicted to cooking and talking about cooking.

This past Monday, afternoon, Ms. Smith was mid-conversation with gourmet food experts at a ShopRite event in Hoboken after she was invited to sample food products and review them. As a thank you, the store is giving her free tickets to the New York Wine and Food Festival.

Later, she will hit the keyboard and let people hear all about it: the food, the specialty products, and the people she encountered.

It all began on Labor Day Weekend in 2007 when Ms. Smith, who resides on River Avenue in Point Pleasant Beach, brought over her specialty ribs to a friend's barbecue. When she was asked for the recipe, she said she thought it would be easier to type it up online, seeing as she had spent the previous eight years becoming quite Internet-savvy. She posted the recipe on a blog. She then posted a second entry, and a third entry and before she knew it, the blog had taken on a life of its own. A list of recipes, restaurants, giveaways – it had it all.

Ms. Smith's blog, [JerseyBites.com](#), quickly chewed its way into the hearts of loyal followers in the area. For the past two years, Ms. Smith said there have consistently been more and more readers.

“Friend-ing” Ms. Smith may not only be done by getting to know her and her interests online. Ms. Smith also devotes much of her time to teaching people about social media and its tools, including popular networking sites such as Facebook, Digg, Twitter and LinkedIn.

With a plate full of knowledge about the Internet, it is no wonder she is become an expert in the field of teaching it.

Ms. Smith grew up in Fair Haven. She spent her college years at Rutgers University in New Brunswick where she majored in psychology, with a minor in English. After graduation, she got a job as the executive director at the Brick Township Chamber of Commerce.

Next entry: Ms. Smith spent four years working as the legislative aid for New Jersey Senator Andy Ciesla. She went on to work for Virginia Haines, Director of the New Jersey Lottery.

Four years later, in 1997, Ms. Smith experienced a new type of luck. She found out she was pregnant with her first child, Tanner, now 12, and she decided to settle down at home, in Point Beach.

Ms. Smith said about a year passed, and she began researching ways to work from home in Point Pleasant Beach.

“I met a woman in Florida who was running a nanny agency, and I started doing some research for her,” Ms. Smith said. “I realized there were few services out there for childcare.”

It was at this point that the Internet became her constant companion, a bond that has remained with her ever since.

Ms. Smith said she formulated about six or seven different nanny Web sites, to assist people who are either seeking a nanny or providing a nanny service. Some of the sites include [4nanny.com](#) and [nannyclassifieds.com](#).

When asked if the process of creating the pages was difficult, Ms. Smith said it was much simpler in the late 1990s than it is today.

Photos

1 2 **3**



Ms. Smith spends much of her time working on her blog, [JerseyBites.com](#), which she started two years ago. Photo by SUEANNE GOSS, STAR NEWS GROUP

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“Back then, it was such a new thing,” she said. “Now, all of the coding – I’ll leave that to the professionals.”

Through creating her nanny sites, Ms. Smith said she has been able to network with people from all over the country.

All the while, Ms. Smith kept up on her Web sites. Slowly, after that monumental Labor Day, her blog became a point of focus.

Originally, Ms. Smith said she simply wanted a place to keep her recipes. But the hunger for her knowledge was becoming more and more noticeable. No longer were her rib-loving friends the only ones who wanted to know what she had cookin’.

“It’s taken on a life of its own,” Ms. Smith said.

She said the blog currently has about 7,000 unique visitors per month. They log on to read, learn and win.

Each week on the blog, there is a Wednesday giveaway. Readers can win prizes like a recent Dove Chocolate giveaway.

Ms. Smith said she believes a large part of formulating a well-received blog is creating a catchy name, one that people hear for the first time, and think they’ve heard it before, in the past.

“I was wearing my JerseyBites T-shirt, and someone yelled, ‘JerseyBites we love you!’”

She said it was almost as if the person knew the name instantaneously.

The blog has given Ms. Smith opportunities that most foodies could only imagine. For example, she was recently able to interview Aaron McCargo of the Food Network, she said. The interview is displayed on JerseyBites.com and details what got Mr. McCargo, also a Jersey native, into cooking.

Ms. Smith said a key to running a successful blog, other than the spicy name, is to keep consistent with it. She said having patience is key to building a nice-sized audience.

People love food. People also seem to enjoy reading blogs that have a local tie-in, Ms. Smith said. By combining the two, she’s concocted herself a crock pot of avid biters.

“Ultimately, my dream is to have JerseyBites in every county,” she said.

She said she envisions a JerseyBites blogger stationed in each of the counties throughout New Jersey. Each blogger would be in charge of representing his or her surf and turf. In this way, those who enjoy either eating or cooking at home could have a chance to learn the best tips from others who live within their local areas.

People are reading now more than ever, according to Ms. Smith. However, it’s not the pages that are turning, but the mice that are clicking. She said it is because of this that she chose to begin teaching workshops and holding seminars to show businesses and individuals how to use the tools of social networking to their advantage.

She said when she first began using the internet back in the ’90s, she realized how useful some of the tools could be. At the time, she focused on the benefits of communicating through message boards and chatrooms, as these were the only available sources of social media.

“I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, this stuff is so powerful,’” she recalled.

Ms. Smith attended a workshop where the speaker attempted to teach the tricks of the social media trade. She took the concept, put her own twist on it, and began approaching local small businesses to offer her consulting services on how to best benefit from following others on Twitter, or keeping an updated blog.

The idea has proven to be more than successful.

“I’ve seen a phenomenal response,” Ms. Smith said. “Everybody wants a piece of me right now.”

Ms. Smith said it is like 1995 all over again. Back then, those who began using the Internet and learned it well benefited most from it. Similarly, she feels people nowadays who learn to successfully use social media tools will progress speedily, as well.

“This is the hot topic right now,” Ms. Smith said.

As for her transition from work-from-home mom [her other son, Connor, is 8 years old,] Ms. Smith said getting back out and being able to connect with people one-on-one, in person, has been gratifying.

Working outside of her home has allowed Ms. Smith's coffee breaks to actually include coffee, rather than her typical household tasks of doing laundry and washing dishes.

However, she does admit that she loves contributing from her home to JerseyBites.com, as well, and the idea of being available to her two sons should they need her is an exceptional perk. Either way you slice it, Ms. Smith has it good.

Ms. Smith currently lives with her sons and her boyfriend, Peter Hulos, 43.

Mr. Hulos said he and Ms. Smith have known each other since high school. He said she is always working on something new, and often, this results in keeping his stomach appeased.

"Her cooking is excellent," he said. "She's always making up her own recipes and she's good at it."

He said he has become trained to pause before he tastes a meal.

"We can't go out to dinner without her taking out her camera," Mr. Hulos said.

He said Ms. Smith will often be taking pictures of their meals at restaurants, as well as meals she cooks at home. She posts the pictures on JerseyBites.com.

Mr. Hulos said he is very proud of the things his girlfriend has accomplished, and of her work ethic.

"She's constantly coming up with new ideas," Mr. Hulos said. "She sees opportunity everywhere."

Kacy Renna, a friend and client of Ms. Smith's, said she was taught to use the social media tools very quickly and easily, thanks to her friend.

"She manages to take something that may seem foreign, and apply it to your business in a simple manner," Ms. Renna said.

Ms. Renna, or njinsurancegirl, as her new Twitter friends now know her, said she first met Ms. Smith about 10 years ago through a friend. At the time, she needed some assistance in designing a Web site, and Ms. Smith offered to help her with this endeavor. From there, the bond grew.

Ms. Smith has taught Mr. Hulos additional Internet skills and also things to avoid, like "clogging the stream" – a term for excessively entering Twitter posts.

To only add to Ms. Smith's laundry list of accomplishments, she also has another blog, www.deborahsmith.com, where people can go to learn more information about her upcoming workshops, like "Better Business Blogging" on Oct. 24 in Sea Girt, and the Twitter Breakfast, on Oct. 16 in Manalapan. The blog also includes some of Ms. Smith's best tips.

Her most recent blog entry on the site gives readers the top 10 tips to running a successful blog, including how to choose the right content and pictures to display. After all, who better to describe the process than a woman with 7,000 hungry viewers a month?

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