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TO AREA GOLF

Nancy Spelsberg BCP Transportation

PLUS: My First Time; Our 150th 10 (or so) Questions; Random Rochesterite; more

### CONTENTS

**APRIL 2014** 





### **28** Road Scholar

Nancy Spelsberg—1995 Mayo class president, state basketball champ, homecoming queen—has always been driven. And now she's applying that drive as president and partner at BCP Transportation in Wisconsin.

### Rooms For Improvement

From cool kitchen counters and cabinets to stone-surround showers, area builders and designers share some design tips and pics.

### **Tore Facts: Our Area Golf Guide**

Historical tidbits, top tips, and best deals at the city's seven public courses.





#### 12 In this issue

#### 15 Short cuts

Four facts about "Presence in the Absence" (the Art Center exhibit that features 600,000 feet of yarn); Rochesterite Emily Carson pops with fashionable color in Stylebook [p.25]; Your first activity when the weather breaks (in 6 words or less); Three Things Every Rochesterite Should Do: Share the Love with Elder Network; more.

#### 16 Oddchester

#### 18 Random Rochesterite

Natalie Loeffler talks about her most memorable New Year's Eve ("we were three blocks away from where the ball dropped"), her sidekick ("if she's not with me, she's at daycare at Bob's Animal Friends"), and why she wants to relive her last year ("I went to Ireland, Amsterdam, New York, Hawaii, and South Africa").

#### 20 My First Time

Rochesterite Cat Thisius fulfills a lifelong dream and becomes a derby girl.

#### **64** Scene about town

PHA Gala draws record crowd, and raises record amount; "Downton Abbey" fans dress for the occasion.

#### 74 Ten (or so) questions

It's our 150th 10 (or so) Questions.

On the cover: Former Rochesterite and current BCP Transportation president Nancy Spelsberg. Photo by Beth Skogen. See our "Road Scholar" story on page 28.

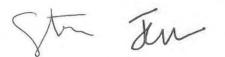
ROCHESTERMAGAZINE.COM **APRIL 2014** 11



## In this Issue

#### Three things you didn't know about this month's issue.

- 1. Sometimes it takes a village to get the story. When a reader gave us a tip about Nancy Spelsberg ("Road Scholar," page 28), we knew the Mayo grad-turned-Wisconsin-trucking company president success story was one we wanted to tell. We also knew that we didn't have time to do it ourselves, since Nancy lives and works just east of Madison. That's when we called Madison Magazine editor Brennan Nardi and asked her for a good freelancer. She immediately connected us to Maggie Ginsberg-Schutz. Then we called Brennan back and asked her for a good freelance photographer, and she connected us with Beth Skogen. Both Maggie and Beth did great work. And, while we were tempted to call Brennan back and ask if she'd edit and fact-check the story for us as well, we did that part ourselves.
- 2. If there's one thing we can count on, it's that when we ask our readers and advertisers for help, you come through. This month, it was home builders and designers who answered our call. Weeks ago, as we worked on our story on today's hottest home trends ("Rooms for Improvement," page 37), we asked area designers and builders to send us their best examples. Within days, we were inundated with dozens of unbelievable designs—from cool kitchen counters and cabinets to stone-surround showers. It was the impetus we needed to finish our own kitchen backsplash, which has been just plaster for the past few months.
- 3. People want winter to end. OK, you probably knew that. But they really, really want it to end. When we posted our monthly "Six Words (or Less)" question ("First outside activity when weather breaks?"), we got more than 70 responses, ranging from "Take all my clothes off" to "Cruise topless (I drive a convertible)." Read all the responses we could fit on page 19. And, we can only hope that, when you are reading this, the weather has finally broken.



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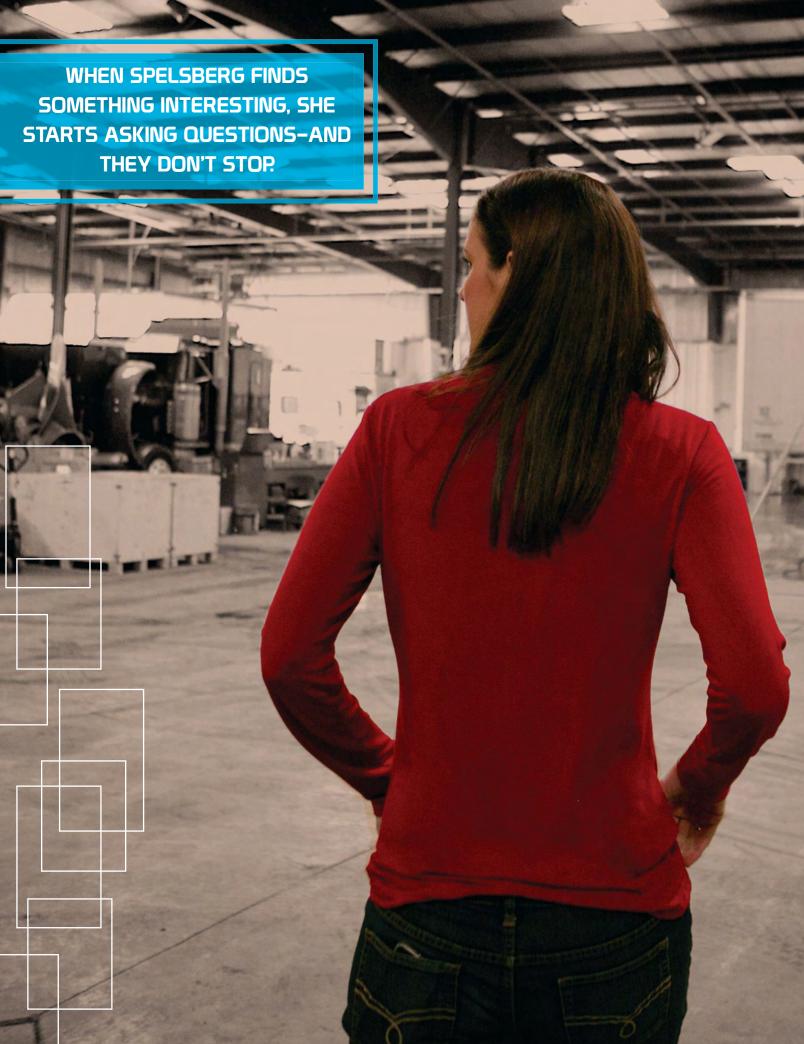


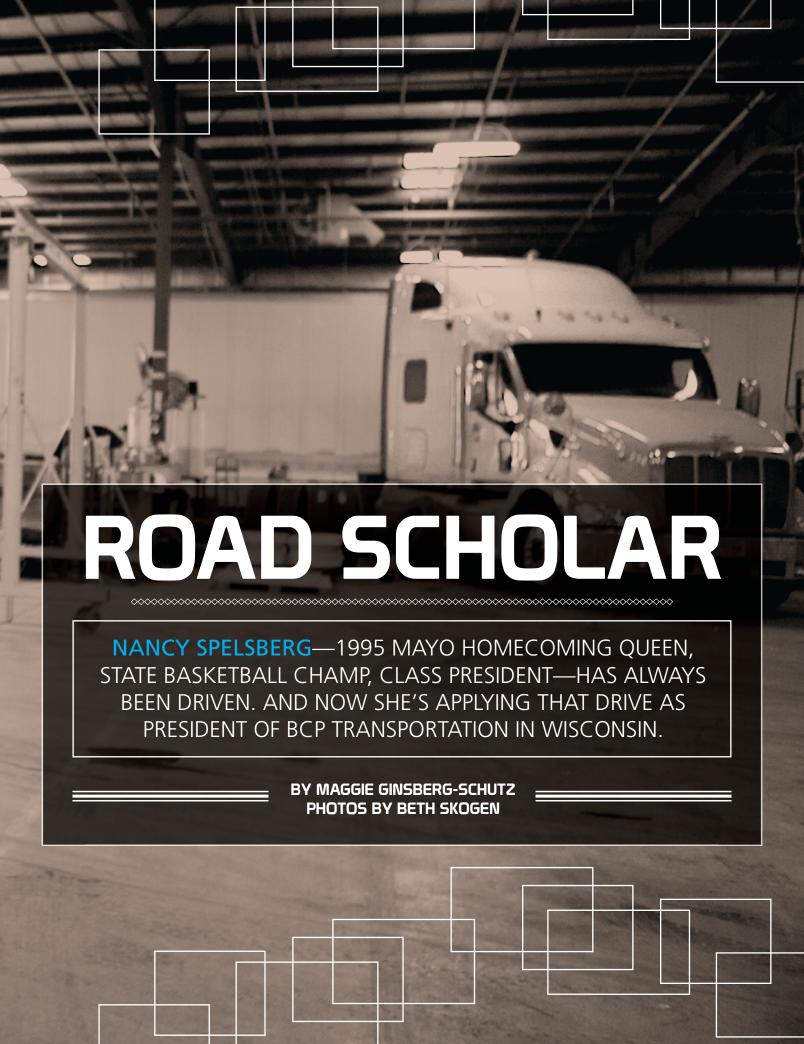
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We're standing in a brightly lit front office, divided into four or five cubicles, where Spelsberg's desk is right in the middle with the rest of them. She introduces me to a handful of women on the phones and pecking away at computers. "The best girls in the world," she tells me: Jami, Shelly, Alisha, Amy.

"We celebrate Women's Suffrage Day every day here, right ladies?" she laughs. They laugh back, and it sounds genuine.

There aren't a lot of women in trucking—fewer than five

percent of American truckers are female. Spelsberg herself doesn't drive big rigs, but she employs a few women who do, and BCP itself is 60 percent women-owned.

In 2013, the State of Wisconsin honored BCP with its Rising Star award recognizing minority and women-owned businesses, and the young company's star does indeed appear to be rising: Spelsberg and her partners opened up shop in May of 2011 with six trucks and seven employees.

30 APRIL 2014 ROCHESTERMAGAZINE.COM



unbelievable business mind," BCP partner Todd Jourdan will tell me later, in a phone call. "She's just really, really—really—intelligent."

Jourdan knows a thing or two about business, specifically trucking. He and

"Here's the thing, Nancy's got just an

business, specifically trucking. He and his dad, Ferrel (a man Spelsberg now calls "The Godfather") sold their first trucking company in 2006 after running it successfully for 14 years. They were focused on their offshoot warehouse pallet factory when they got a letter from Spelsberg, then a young engineer with an MBA who was interested in purchasing an existing business. Although that pallet factory turned out to be a bigger bite than she could chew on her own, she made a lasting impression on the two men. Later, when they decided they'd like to get back into trucking but needed a fresh, smart leader, they knew just who to call. They and nine others formed a partnership group with Spelsberg in charge and she immediately blew Jourdan's expectations far, far out of the water.

"Tell you what, our old company, we did really well. We made money," says Jourdan. "But to watch her work and what she's done with this place—it's amazing. I don't know how else to explain it, other than that."

Growing up in Rochester, Spelsberg certainly wasn't dreaming of owning a truck-driving operation. She wanted to be a meteorologist, actually. Then for a while it was a math teacher. Then it was an engineer, like her schoolteacher mom's two sisters. By the time she knew she wanted to go into manufacturing and own a business, she used to tease her dad, lamenting, "Why couldn't you have owned a company I could take over? Why did you have to do what you do?" Her father is Thomas Spelsberg, the esteemed and widely recognized biochemist and cancer researcher at Mayo.

When asked if he ever imagined Nancy would be running a trucking company in Wisconsin, her dad chuckles. "No, not at all," he says. "But I did always imagine her being very successful in some business."

Her mom, Liza, was a stay-at-home mom for Nancy and siblings Sarah and Thomas Jr. "And a very good stay-at-home mom at

Just three short years later, she helms a \$19-million-a-year company with 70 employees and 26 independently contracted drivers running 73 trucks covering 7.3 million annual miles across the lower 48 states.

"I work with people all day," says Spelsberg.
"I'm working with drivers, customers,

and employees to coordinate loads and schedules. I have to balance driver schedules, load requirements, and truck maintenance requirements and it is like putting together a big 3-D puzzle every day. I love it."

But if this business is booming, it's not because Spelsberg is a woman. It's because she's Spelsberg.

ROCHESTERMAGAZINE.COM APRIL 2014 31

#### **ROAD SCHOLAR**

that," Nancy says. "I would call her my dad's 'handler."

Nancy grew up in the Folwell Heights neighborhood and attended Mayo High School, where she was homecoming queen, class president, and—("You can probably tell she was one of the big girls under the basket," says her dad)—part of the state basketball championship team (with Kelly and Coco Miller) her senior year of 1995.

"She's very good natured, very kind, very generous, but she can be feisty and tough if you try to take advantage of her or if she felt like she was not being treated properly," says her dad. "Put it like this: She'd give you the shirt off her back, but don't you dare try to take it from her."

She's also used to the kind ribbing that her father throws her way, and she throws it right back. It's a quality he's sure helps her out now at work in an industry so heavily dominated by men.

"She calls it like it is, so this is good for leading a bunch of men. And boy, they tell me, she's not one to mess with," he laughs, unsurprised. "I remember she told the babysitter one time, 'No one tells me what to do in my house."

Spelsberg took advantage of Minnesota-Wisconsin reciprocity to follow her two older siblings to University of Wisconsin-Madison. There she earned her engineering degree, her MBA, married star basketball player Charlie Wills, and went to work for Alliant Energy Corporation, climbing that corporate ladder, and fast. But she never shook that burning desire to own and operate her own manufacturing business, and her divorce after seven years of marriage fueled it even more.

"At that point I was like, 'I have nothing to lose now, you know what I mean?" says Spelsberg. "If I don't try it now, I'll always wish I did. I wanted to risk it all. I needed to do something for myself."

At the advice of her law professor, Spelsberg used a Dun & Bradstreet search to send out 70 letters inquiring into possible business purchases; that's how she met the Jourdans, one of six or seven responses she got. That same professor also planted a seed that grows to this day.

"He said I should try to find a way to make





BCP Transportation's 70-plus trucks haul loads 7 million miles per year.

money while I sleep," she recalls. "And when he said that, I thought, 'Hmm, well that's interesting."

Now, when Spelsberg finds something interesting, she starts asking questions—and they don't stop.

"Of course now she can answer them all herself," says Todd Jourdan, "but when we started this our first year it was, 'Why is this such and such a way?' 'Why is this costing this?' 'Why don't we do it this way?' Well, we'd make the change and all of a sudden there's a huge, huge cost savings. The biggest thing with Nancy is communication. And

that can go from a driver to an office person, to a shop person, warehouse, me, my father, it's just how she breaks everything down. It's... I've never seen anything like it."

Back at the warehouse, our boot heels clicking against the cement and echoing off high metallic ceilings, Spelsberg stops dead in her tracks. There's a light flickering high above our heads, and she wants to know why.

One of the first things she did when they moved into this warehouse was secure a Focus on Energy grant to replace all these dinosaur fluorescents with energy efficient

32 APRIL 2014 ROCHESTERMAGAZINE.COM



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#### **ROAD SCHOLAR**

lighting and occupancy sensors. When appalled by \$1,800-a-month phone bills, she figured out that 1-800 numbers were costing the company \$700 each month, and she eliminated them. When it became cost-prohibitive to service their growing fleet of trucks elsewhere, she started her own on-site maintenance shop.

Of course for a trucking company, there is no greater financial burden than fuel costs. When you're talking about six miles to the gallon on 130,000 miles a year per truck, every tenth of MPG counts. Spelsberg motivates the truckers with bonuses and a public display of the numbers, because if she can get a single driver from 6.3 to 6.5 MPG, that's \$3,000 a year savings. She's invested in external generators so when trucks idle all night long for power, instead of burning a gallon every hour they burn less than a fifth. She's invested in side skirting and trailer tails to make the fleet more aerodynamic.

"All the checks and all the bills come through me," she says of her attempts to avoid the nickel-and-dime pitfalls of operating a large budget. "It's almost funny because it becomes like Monopoly money, 'Oh, it's just \$10,000.' Well, holy cow, that's a lot of money."

We walk past a UW Badger banner hanging on the warehouse wall, a souvenir from some bowl game past. BCP is in charge of hauling the football team's equipment from game to game. The two drivers suit up head to toe in Badger shirts and slacks, join the team on the sidelines with the players and coaches. When they play at home, BCP gets to tailgate out of the back of the truck.

With 70-plus trucks hauling loads 7 million-plus miles per year, BCP has seen its share of odd loads. "We once hauled a truckload of animal fat that was going into a name brand makeup factory," Spelsberg recalls. "I said, 'There is animal fat in my makeup?' We have also hauled fish guts and heads on many occasions into a cat food plant. Another time a customer paid us for a full truckload, to move one little box, as in a box that could have fit into a small car."

On the business side, Spelsberg seems to have indeed found a way to follow that professor's advice and make money while she sleeps. At any given moment, when her eyes pop wide in the middle of the night, she knows one of her trucks is out there, lumbering down some distant highway, delivering the high-quality service she says Midwestern driving companies are famous for in this business.

Of course, it's not without its challenges; there was a pretty bad ice storm in Dallas last year. A trailer got stolen once in Florida. And on New Year's Day 2013, Spelsberg was sitting at breakfast with her sister when she got a phone call that she'd lost a truck to fire in Colorado.

"My driver wasn't hurt so I started laughing, and she's like, 'I can't believe you're laughing.' But the thing is, you can't make this stuff up," says Spelsberg. "This is why we have insurance. I enjoy the challenge of it, the fact that every day there's something. You try to only worry about the things you can control. You can't sweat the other stuff, because that's just distracting."

She stops a forklift driver so she can examine his sweater, then sends him on his way. We're surrounded by vertical racking, implemented to store inventory for clients; it's maximized warehouse space but in the very near future, they'll outgrow it. There's no telling how big this company will get—Spelsberg is more concerned with "rightsizing" than growth—but one thing is abundantly clear.

She's in it for the long haul. ■

34 APRIL 2014 ROCHESTERMAGAZINE.COM