Esposito proves it’s a lady’s world as well

By Mark Leslie

INCKLEY, Ohio — She rejected a career in teaching, now she is teaching young greenkeepers. She didn’t do well in public speaking, but who now travels each year to local and national conferences, even to England for week-long studies with the British International Golf Greenskeepers Association... who, despite her gender, does “not feel like I’m in a minority”... who, with her sister, Sue, operate their family course and employ their husbands. An enigma? Esposito has quite another opinion.

“I grew up doing this,” she said. “When I graduated [from college in 1971] I returned and just kept going at it. It seemed natural.”

Esposito “grew up doing the job” because her parents (Donald and Bee Krush), an aunt, an uncle and a third couple had turned the family farm into two 18-hole golf courses that opened in 1964, when she was in junior high school. (The neighbors later assumed ownership of the second course.)

“In a family business the family works, or the business doesn’t survive. To me, it was like a household chore — only I rarely stayed inside the clubhouse,” she said. Instead, as a teen Esposito “dug ditches, laid tile, and picked rocks — my most dreaded job. I also learned how to drive a dump truck and tractor.”

The practice range at Hinckley Hills Golf Course cared by the touch of Jean Esposito.

Now, with 30 years experience under her belt, she manages five full-time employees — including husband Mark, who does assistant and mechanic, plus nephews Donald, 23, and Michael, 19. Her staff swells to 10 in the summer.

The first woman in the country to be president of a chapter of golf course superintendents, she is devoted to improving her own education as well as that of the 320-member Northern Ohio chapter. She was enticed to travel to Great Britain in 1984 when an American group took a tour and attended a program organized by the English and Scottish greenskeepers association, which later merged into BIGGA. She has repeated that trip the past four years.

Why? “We felt they have so much to offer us,” Esposito said. “There’s a little bit different look at the profession. How do they cope with stringent water and pesticide regulations, and which of their practices might we copy to lessen our usage? When you lessen your usage you lessen your cost and contamination possibilities.”

Esposito’s problems are “basically the same” all over the world, she said. And yet, grass types may vary and “because the weather conditions are different, the demands on them are different... Some of their restrictions are unbelievable. An English friend of ours is in Austria and they won’t allow him to put a colorant in the lake.”

Home in Northern Ohio — where she was first elected chapter president in 1987, and again in 1995 for a term that ends in November — she has championed association involvement and education. Much has changed in those eight intervening years, she said.

“The job has become more demanding on with the national association (with the bylaw and affiliation agreements). And because of other legal requirements, more paperwork is involved today.”

The Northern Ohio association is “very close,” Esposito said. “Northern Ohio members are very good at helping one another, sharing problems, helping to avoid pitfalls... When there was an atrazine contamination problem a few years ago, we had such a networking effort that within two days everybody in our area knew about it.”

Of course, nowhere is the association “closer” than at Esposito’s own golf course. Whereas many superintendents face the problem of long hours away from home and family, Jean Esposito’s husband can relate to her better than most spouses. He works alongside her.

“Mark understands what I’m going through because he’s physically here with me,” she said. “So many times, unfortunately, the wife is home with the children and doesn’t know what her husband’s doing. She simply knows he’s not home when maybe she needs him. It’s always been real important if the spouse can be involved to some degree in their work. Otherwise, it can put a lot of stress on a marriage because we do have long hours. I know a lot of guys who take their children with them to water their course and that gives their wives a break.”

Being part of a family-owned operation has other pluses, she said.

“I have [maintenance] options that country clubs do not have. They have more demands from their members, asking for faster greens, etc. Our customers see grass growing, good color and it puts well and they’re happy with that. So it’s our decision rather than theirs as to how to care for it.”

“We also have the option that they don’t [at a members’ club] where, if a member does something wrong out on the course; you have to go through a committee to correct them. On our course we can just tell a golfer, ‘We don’t do that sort of thing here...’”

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