

Opening New Doors

Luke Cella, MAGCS

PHOTOS: LUKE CELLA

Chasing the prestige of being the superintendent at a private club and commandeering a large salary may not have been their top priority, but little did they know at the time, the benefits and the security of the job would lead them to a fruitful career in the golf industry.

I caught up with Fred Behnke, CGCS, Greg Thalmann, Gary Hearn and Steve Partyka over the past few months to shed some insight on how they successfully retired as golf course superintendents.



Every month is Movember for Greg Thalmann, captured here sharing a laugh with friends.

Greg Thalmann started working for Kenny Goodman at Mount Prospect Golf Club in 1978 and then followed him to Green Acres Country Club as his Assistant Superintendent.

Greg relates, “Kenny was a very hard person to work for and I learned quickly to do things the right way, Kenny’s way. Kenny led by example.” Greg learned from his parents as well, they owned their own landscaping business, and provided for their family through their hard work and dedication.

As a golf course superintendent, Greg stressed the importance of leading people. He explained to me, “you can’t wait for other people, you need to be a problem solver and lead your staff to create solutions.” As caretaker of Fox Run Golf

Links, Greg did what was best for the course and not always what was best for the individual golfer. The course is the largest asset at the facility and that is what he was hired to do, to take care of it, something he did since 1983. Looking forward, Greg knows he will miss the early morning tours and the sun greeting him each day, however he won’t miss the stress and worry that comes with the job. His accomplishments at the course are nothing compared to being married to his wonderful wife Trudi for 40 years and raising three great kids Sarah, Nathan, and Abby together.

Greg served the MAGCS as a director for several years and was Chairman of the first Scholarship Committee. Each summer, children and grandchildren of MAGCS members submit applications to the committee and a few are sent off to school with some aid to help in their studies – a process that all began with Greg at the helm.

When Gary Hearn returned from his tour of service in 1980 he needed to supplement his GI Bill to help pay for his computer science classes at Kankakee Community College. He liked the golf industry (his father worked at Kappa Golf Course near Bloomington) and decided to look there for work. He was hired by Bill Bonnett at Kankakee Elks and worked with Bob Miller, Bill’s assistant. It took a couple of seasons before Gary switched colleges and majors – he headed to University of Illinois and entered their turf program in Horticulture, where he finished his B.S. in 1985 while working part time for Frank Stynchula at Lincolnshire Fields CC in Champaign.

Upon graduation Gary worked for Rick Wilson at Oak Brook Golf Course, where he eventually became the Superintendent for a couple of seasons and ended up hosting part of the Western Open when Butler National flooded in 1987. The back nine of Oak Brook Golf Course became the first nine in the tournament. Imagine getting that phone call with a day's notice.

Gary continued his work in the public sector spending the majority of his years at Salt Creek Golf Course, a journey he calls worthwhile. He credits, his dad, Bill Bonnet, Oscar Miles and Al Fierst instilling in him a simple value to love what you do, do it the best you can, and enjoy everyday.



The two Steves, Partyka and Stewart. Partyka knows he'll miss the many friends that he has made over the years when he moves up to Wisconsin.

Gary knows he'll miss some of his colleagues but was ready to retire when the restrictions on his budget, man-power and worn out equipment started to take their toll. He has no regrets and feels a terrific sense of accomplishment. Gary looks forward to the future, and is not certain what he'll do – he just remarried and his new wife, a native of the Philippines,



Gary Hearn always enjoys a good laugh as he gets caught next to a sign that embodies his golf game.

has only been in the US for five years. He'd like to travel the States with her visiting friends and relatives in between trips to her homeland.

Steve Partyka, his name is easy to spell if you start with Party

and just add a ka, gave me updates on his retirement countdown clock each time I saw him in 2013. Steve has been at

the helm of White Pine Golf Course in Bensenville since 1994 and retires this month at the age of 55 with 39 years and 10 months of service with the Bensenville Park District. He credits his father, Ed who preceded him at the course for him being in the business and encouraging him to stay with it. In fact, his dad used to pull him out of high school so he could come and mow greens at the course. Steve graduated from the College of DuPage with his Associates in Horticulture after a stint at Elmhurst College where he studied Political Science.

He appreciated all the time that the late Lee Overpeck, a Scott's salesman spent with him on the golf course. Steve, like most, put many hours in at the course but always had the goal of retiring early in life to enjoy the time he has now. He credits his success to not putting things off and taking care of items as they arise. A project that he's particularly proud of is the installation of a 1500' deep well at the course and managing the high levels of sodium found in the soils. He also took part in starting a nursery on the property that has been the source of over 5000 trees planted within the Village of Bensenville.

Upon retirement Steve is moving to Door County, Wisconsin with his wife and daughter. He'll be closer to his mom and looks forward to fishing, riding his bike, and working at Lambeau Field during football season. Steve knows he'll miss his crew and the people at the park district when he makes the move, but looks forward to not working everyday of the week, waking at the crack of dawn, and worrying about the weather. Steve expressed a special thanks to all the sales representatives and other superintendents in the industry that made his work enjoyable.

Fred Behnke got his start in the golf business while he was driving a city bus. Well, at least he explained that he used to drive past a course on his route and, "it looked like a better place than where I was so I made some calls trying to find out about the business." Funny enough, he ended up speaking to Ray Gerber and Ray passed him off to Bob Williams who ended up hiring Fred at Bob'O'Link Country Club.



After finding out Fred was a Political Science major things really came together as I remember Fred in many meetings.

Fred graduated from Carthage College in Kenosha with a BA in Political Science and eventually completed a certificate at Harper College in Parks and Grounds Management.

When asked about his industry mentors, Fred credits

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Bob Williams and Mike Bavier, Sr. "Bob made me go back to school and take it seriously. Mike let me take flowers from his greenhouse to woo the girl who became my bride. I'm alive today because of her." Fred worked for Mike Bavier, Sr. at Inverness prior to working at Mt. Prospect Golf Club for the past thirty years.

Fred has realized knowing how to grow grass is the least important part about being a golf course superintendent. Maybe knowing his audience, he told me, "there are a lot of people out there smarter than you – listen and learn and don't be afraid to ask for help." He went on to explain, "imagine what your job would be like without your staff on your side, be proactive, let them know what you want."

Fred worked a variety of jobs before getting into golf; working on a road crew, factory shifts, and the bus thing – he did sell women's shoes (like Al Bundy) and all this has formed him in some way. Looking back his life at Mt. Prospect Golf Club, "I am grateful for the opportunity to see some of the best golf course operations in the world through my professional associations and to have had the opportunity to try my hand at putting together a semi-reasonable facsimile of one."

Those who know Fred, I think will agree, he's a kind and gentle soul and when asked what the best thing he's learned on his own, he responded, " Be kind, everyone you meet is going through some hardship."

Fred won't miss being the boss, of that he is certain. He does miss the dawn and getting the day started at the course. It is peculiar, three of the four mentioned to me they'd miss the early mornings on the course. I'm not sure that will ever go away, but I can tell you from experience, you can still wake up early and go outside. You just have to open the door.

Congratulations Fred, Greg, Gary and Steve.




were tired of funding my endeavors and wanted to take me off their payroll. To make them happy, I went on some job interviews but nothing really panned out or piqued my interest. Then along came another gentleman, Dave Wollenberg. At the time, Dave was a salesman for Canon Turf Supply out of Indianapolis and called on Cary at Curtis Creek. Prior to working for Canon Turf, Dave was the assistant at Silver Lake Country Club under Dudley Smith (past president 1967). Dave told me that Dudley was looking for an Assistant. This lead that Dave gave me led me to where I am today. I'll be starting my 23rd season at Silver Lake Country Club. If you were wondering, my golf career was put on hold. Sometimes it's not about what you know, it's who you know.

As we enter the holiday season and winter months take time from work and spend more time with your family and friends. 22 years goes really fast and the next 22 will be even faster.

Happy Holidays and New Year. @

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