

By Pat Jones

Michelle Feher has never been a typical superintendent, but her story over the past few years is an all-too-familiar tale about how the economy has overtaken the golf industry and forced many to evolve into new roles.

Like many of her male counterparts, Feher was born into the world of farming. She worked her family's 10 acres of vegetable plots in Hartville, Ohio, enough to know that she loved being outdoors but didn't want to grow crops the rest of her life. Drawn to turf, she eventually enrolled at Virginia Tech. As an undergrad, she spent three summers interning under Brian Mabie at Akron's Firestone Country Club and, in 1992, became the first woman to graduate from the VT turf program. ("It was not a big deal," she recalls matter-of-factly.)

After a stint as an assistant under the legendary Dick Bator at Kirtland Country Club east of Cleveland, she heard about an open position at a modest little facility called Boston Hills Country Club 20 miles south.

"When I interviewed, they asked me how long I planned to stay," she says. "I said a couple of years because I viewed it as a stepping-stone job. That was 13 years ago."

Female superintendents are as rare as unicorns in the greenkeeping universe. GCSAA has just 279 female members. That means that only about 1 in 60 U.S. courses are maintained by a woman. Feher belongs to the even more elite group as one of just 18 CGCSs who happen to have two X chromosomes.

Over more than a decade at Boston Hills, she helped build the course's reputation

as one of the best-maintained "affordable" facilities in the area. She also jumped into leadership roles with the Northern Ohio GCSA with gusto.

"Sheree Scarbrough (now with Silico Turf) was doing the chapter newsletter and I sort of volunteered to help her for a while," she says. "That was 15 years ago."

Along the way, she's amassed a goodly pile of GCSAA chapter publications awards and learned how to crank out copy, manage advertising and beat up on printers to get her newsletter out the door...all in her spare time.

Life was good at her little course and Michelle Frazier (her maiden name) became known nationally as a leading superintendent and, of course, a bit of a poster girl for the notion that superintendents didn't all have a Y chromosome. She met and married Chris Feher a few years back and she began to think about the daunting task of being a superintendent/mommy. (Their daughter, Isabella, came along a year ago.)

But, fate had a different plan for her. In the middle of the last decade, real estate values in the Hudson, Ohio, area around Boston Hills ballooned and the facility – which was already being eyed for development in the affluent area – faced major physical changes due to planned road construction nearby.

"We had plans in place to move holes around and continue on as a course, but it seemed far more likely to become condominiums or retail, so they closed up shop in 2007." Feher considered finding another superintendent position, but there were few openings. And then the economy tanked.

Fortunately, she was hired as a property manager by the company that owned Boston Hills. Now, she oversees buildings, offices and land – including her old course, which now sits fallow awaiting a new, post-recession use. But, she continues her involvement in the profession as the chapter administrator, editor, Web guru and head cheerleader for the NOGCSA. In short, some things never change.

I caught up with Feher to find out what her life's like these days, being a chick among guys in the golf business and what it's like to be in the ironic position of trying to sell a piece of land that you put so much TLC into for a decade.

WHAT WAS BOSTON HILLS LIKE?

It is – was, I guess – a neat little course built in the 1930s. It played to anyone's abilities.

They call me Ms. Turfhead

Michelle Feher's unique career and life journey speaks volumes about the state of the business.

It had tiny greens with a lot of character. We were a limited budget course – my budget for everything was \$210,000 annually. It was quite a challenge, but we put out a pretty good product.

HOW DID YOU LEARN THE COURSE WOULD BE CLOSED AND SOLD?

Well, *everything* is for sale, so I wasn't shocked. Boston Hills was positioned in a perfect location for playing golf, but that same location made it prime real estate. We had seen the same decline in play everyone else had and lost outings, so revenue had flattened out. Then the state announced it was expanding and rerouting the highway that had been in front of the course to now run across several holes. Basically, the highway access that had helped us so much was now going to put us out of business. We had a good remodeling plan (to relocate lost holes), but the compensation the state offered versus the cost to make it playable was a bad deal. It was a business decision, plain and simple, at that point.

HOW WORRIED WERE YOU FOR YOUR JOB?

I kept thinking, "They're gonna make this right – we'll be able to work through this." The plan was in place for the new holes and it was feasible. But I slowly got this feeling of dread in my stomach that it wasn't working right. That was *not* a good feeling. I kept working. I've always been a company person, but it was hard to keep the staff focused. It was pretty difficult – we'd put our heart and soul into that place. Realizing it was going to close put a new perspective on life. It made me realize that life throws you curveballs and you have to find a way to hit them.

WHAT WAS THE PLAN FOR THE PROPERTY?

It would probably have been shops and houses, but zoning issues slowed it down and then the economy tanked. So it's sitting fallow, waiting for whatever comes along.

WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU KNEW ABOUT THE CLOSURE?

The old owner told me he'd keep me on to do the shutdown of the course. Since I knew in advance, I put out feelers for another superintendent job but I didn't get any offers I liked, so I stayed on with the ownership group as a property manager.

WHAT'S THAT JOB LIKE?

My typical day is dealing with tenant requests, complaints, maintenance issues – it's different every day. I manage contracts for snow removal, HVAC repairs, lease renewals, vacancies ... the whole shebang! I have three

techs that work with me on maintenance for six properties. We also do construction when new tenants want to do build-outs.

SOUNDS A LOT LIKE BEING A SUPERINTENDENT.

It really is. I'm just not mowing or trying to keep grass alive. Otherwise it is a lot of the same stuff. I worry about weather, construction, aging buildings and equipment that need babying. Those things determine how my day is going to go instead of Mother Nature.

YOU MAY NOT BE A SUPERINTENDENT, BUT YOU'RE STILL INVOLVED WITH NOGCS AS THE CHAPTER ADMINISTRATOR AND PUBLICATION EDITOR, RIGHT?

As far as my chapter involvement, nothing's really changed from what I used to do. I'm not as involved with national activities and I don't serve on committees or do the chapter



Feher is one of 279 female members of the GCSAA and one of 18 female CGCSs – 13 of those are superintendents and five are retired or affiliate members.

delegate thing anymore. All the rest of the everyday chapter management stuff is the same, but I also now handle the books. It's a little challenging keeping up with member requests, but I try to give them the same service I give my tenants. I'm still pretty much a volunteer. It's just not viable for us to pay a chapter executive a full salary.

HOW'S THE CHAPTER DOING GIVEN THE TOUGH TIMES?

Membership is actually about the same. We've had a few guys who are out of work shift to retired status. Advertising in the newsletter has taken a huge hit. That's been extremely difficult financially, so we've scrambled to cut costs. We took the newsletter nearly 100 percent digital. We used to print 550 paper copies of each issue. Now there are just about 50 people that still want a printed copy and the rest get it online.

Sponsorships are down a little, but that hasn't hurt us as much as some chapters. Northern Ohio has always been fiercely independent about keeping business and sales pitches out of meetings, so we've never relied on sponsors for education. We opened the idea up for discussion, but decided to stay lean and not get into sponsorships. The companies actually seem to appreciate that. Affiliates shouldn't have to constantly reach into their pockets to underwrite things. It's not fair and many can't afford it now. In the long run, it makes us more of an equal-opportunity chapter.

SO, WHAT'S IT LIKE BEING A CHICK IN A DUDE'S WORLD?

(Laughs). It honestly was never an issue for me. Maybe that's part of growing up on a farm. There's no male/female distinction made. Everyone just works.

WAS IT UNCOMFORTABLE AT TIMES?

I occasionally got hit on at conferences or whatever, but I was almost always surrounded



by a bunch of guys who just weren't going to let anything happen to me. It was like having a hundred overly protective older brothers around me all the time.

IS THERE SOME KIND OF EXCLUSIVE SECRET CLUB FOR FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS?

I wish! GCSAA did hold a women's forum for a few years. We had about 50 women at the first one, and it immediately turned into a gripe session about sexual harassment, lack of respect and basically all the same darned issues that face any female in any workplace. I sat there and thought, "You've gotta be kidding me!" The solution is simple: You just have to take charge of your life and your career. It's not different in any other industry.

THEN WHY HAVEN'T MORE WOMEN COME INTO THE PROFESSION?

It takes a special breed of person to be a golf course superintendent. A lot of women – and men – just aren't cut out for it. When I started school, no one told me to get out or that I was crazy. Dave Chalmers at Virginia Tech thought it was great. I'm not going to say he didn't have concerns, so he did everything to help me make it. I was the first female turf graduate from VT, but I also got a bachelor's degree in horticulture and landscape contracting, so I had it covered if golf didn't work out.

SO WHAT ADVICE DO YOU GIVE TO YOUNG LADIES WHO ARE INTERESTED IN THE PROFESSION?

My first question is always, "Why are you doing this?" Are they just picking it for fun or are they really committed? Are they currently

working at a course and do they understand the realities? Are they willing to have a strong personality? You just can't take any crap from anybody. The minute you show weakness they'll walk all over you.

I'm always happy to help girls, but I never felt any big responsibility to mentor them any differently than guys. But, in general, they need to understand that this business is not designed for all women. You have to have the work ethic and the physical strength. City girls aren't usually going to do as well as country girls. But, those things are true for guys too! It's a lifestyle. You're in charge of one very large living thing. You work, eat and

sleep it. The Weather Channel becomes your "god." That drove my husband nuts!

SPEAKING OF WHICH, HOW'S MARRIED LIFE IN THIS WEIRD BUSINESS?

I'd dated before I met Chris, but whenever it started to get serious the guy would get jealous of the job or he couldn't handle my hours. Chris and I really got to know each other well before we married. Our schedules were really different – he's a laid-back restaurant manager and kind of a night owl and I'm a Type-A morning person – but we golfed together a lot and bowled in the winter and got comfortable with each other. I made it clear that, "Here's what I do, I'm around guys all the time, I have pretty rough hours. Take it or leave it." He took it!

HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED SCHEDULES SINCE YOUR DAUGHTER, ISABELLA, WAS BORN LAST YEAR?

He's now a regional manager for a pizza chain, so his job is more normal but he still works late sometime. We both get Sundays off together. Isabella's in day care but grandma helps, too.

SO, IS ISABELLA BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND THAT HER MOMMY IS A TURFHEAD?

Not yet, but she will. I'll always be a turfhead at heart. I love this business. I love the people and the friendships. It's not something I can walk away from. So many people helped me along the way, personally and professionally, that I'm not going to throw that away. They're family, too. That's why I do it. **GCI**