

**Thanks to trailblazers like Lynn Richert,  
women superintendents are getting the**





# RESPECT

they richly deserve

BY BRIDGET FALBO

**E**ven when she's changing a mower reel or spraying pesticide on a fairway, people still don't believe Lynn Richert is a superintendent.

Even while sitting in her office — the superintendent's office, mind you — at Angushire GC in St. Cloud, Minn., sales people stop by and ask Richert where her boss is. Telephone callers frequently ask for Mr. Richert.

To Richert, it's a frustrating part of being a trailblazer, but one she cheerfully accepts to do a job she loves.

"[People] assume it's a guy in my position," Richert says.

Statistics from the GCSAA make clear that people's confusion about Richert is at least understandable. GCSAA reports that only 153 women belong to the organization, which has more than 20,000 members. That's right — women constitute less than 1 percent of its membership. And GCSAA has been criticized for using the generalized pronoun "he," rather than a more gender-neutral rendition, in its literature.

Getting into such a male-dominated profession is not easy for women. Younger women have few role models with which to identify, and that stunts the development of female mentors so vital to the development of the next generation of women superintendents.

But there is hope on the horizon. Those GCSAA numbers are changing. Thanks to the efforts of Richert and others like her, the idea of women joining the ranks of superintendents is not as unusual as you think. In his position as director of media relations for the GCSAA, Jeff Bollig says he has noticed a change in the field.

"More women are getting into the profession because of all the turfgrass programs [at schools], more exposure of golf in the media and more females playing the game," Bollig says. "With the turfgrass degree, you don't have to grow up on a course."

As in many fields these days, an academic background helps launch careers.

"[In the past], the profession of greenkeeping was learned," says Jan Beljan, currently a golf course architect with Fazio Design Group and previously an assistant superintendent for six years at Kingwood CC in Kingwood, W.Va. "It was an apprenticeship. In the past few years, much more emphasis has been put on agronomics as a science, and anybody can learn the job if they

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# Woman On a Mission

A turfgrass professor told me that golf course maintenance was too tough for a woman. That only fueled my desire to be the best superintendent possible

By Kathy Antaya, CGCS

I've always loved rainy days in summer — especially the day-long, soaking kind. As a kid, I would joyfully splash through the puddles, unclog the street sewer grates and watch the water spiral down. I refused to come in out of the rain until I was drenched and the puddles drained away.

Today, as a superintendent, I perform that same routine, but now I get paid for it. By the way, I still love rainy days.

I get the morning chores done, sweep the shop and send the crew home early. Then the fun really begins.

I jump in the cart to inspect the course, draining every puddle I can find. Every superintendent has his or her own secret passions about a golf course — the perfect mowing pattern, a spiral-raked bunker, and the sound of sprinklers throwing water. What a great career we have chosen.

As an 18-year-old college student, I longed to be a superintendent. I met other students at school equally enthusiastic about turfgrass management.

We helped each other through difficult classes and group-studied for most exams — even job hunting became a

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have a desire and study the science, learn the equipment and have the skills to manage people."

But agronomy still hides in the agriculture department, making it difficult for women to access the often male-dominated programs. From her experience in school,



Ann Weaver says colleges don't do enough to interest women in the field.

Ann Weaver doesn't think colleges do enough to interest women in the field. Weaver, a former superintendent, oversees the municipal courses in Sacramento, Calif., as golf manager for Capital City Golf.

"At the college level, [the profession] is not presented in a way that reaches a lot of the female students," Weaver notes.

Joe Vargas, professor of botany and plant pathology at Michigan State University, agrees there's a lack of recognition of the program by women.

"This university has had a population of 50 percent women and 50 percent men for many years, and our turf program has been here for 30 years. But it is only in the last 10 years that women have entered the program," he says.

Karl Danneberger, professor of horticulture and crop science at The Ohio State University, acknowledges that women may find themselves in the minority if they look into turf

management programs.

"With 30 students in a class and only three women, it can be intimidating," Danneberger says. "When I bring in superintendents to talk to the class, they're always male because there are so few women in the profession. There are not a lot of women superintendents, so there are not a lot of role models."

## Determination to succeed

Despite these handicaps, some women became superintendents through a determination to work at something they love. When Zelda Baxter joined the GCSAA in 1956 at the age of 45 as the first woman in the organization, she laid the groundwork for other women to follow.

Clay Loyd, a past communications director for the organization who is currently writing a book on its history, reports that the subject of her membership was discussed and debated by the executive committee. But his research indicated no evidence her admission was ever in doubt.

Baxter had a long association with the business of golf as a pro shop operator before taking subsequent superintendent positions in both Iowa and Illinois. She reportedly felt accepted by the association, even though it was dominated by men, and said one of her proudest achievements was having trained nine young men who went on to become successful superintendents.

As with Baxter, women have often apprenticed at courses as irrigation technicians, course crew members and assistant superintendents and view themselves as well-qualified for the jobs, no matter their gender.



Zelda Baxter (kneeling, left) was the first woman to join the GCSAA in 1956.

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## Woman On a Mission

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group project. I realized there were many different ways to manage turfgrass, and many people willing to help you.

With only two women in the turf programs at Michigan State University, we were a noticeable minority. I don't remember more than two incidents that struck me as gender discrimination, but one cemented my resolve to become the best superintendent possible.

After an awards ceremony, a respected turfgrass professor and a distinguished superintendent attempted to convince me that a superintendent's job would be too hard and I should consider my future family.

They said, "Wouldn't you rather go into sales, where you could take advantage of your feminine wiles?" I politely said no and turned away — while thinking decidedly *impolite* thoughts and more determined than ever to prove them wrong.

As assistant superintendents, my colleagues and I commiserated annually at the winter conference. We shared stories typical of new assistants: forgetting

**I look around a group of superintendents and see people just like me.**

something the boss said, getting embarrassed in front of the crew, lack of respect from the staff.

All of us worked ungodly hours, heard few thank yous and were underpaid. However, most of us were happily working our way through the system toward the day we would be in charge.

As a superintendent, I have found the same sense of unity and common ground amongst my peers. It's surpris-

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"I didn't see myself as a female or others as males. I saw myself as a professional just doing my job," Beljan says.

Weaver didn't realize how few women were in the field until she entered the job market after college in the late 1970s.

"When I was in school, I believed whatever I put my mind to, I could do, and I never saw [my gender] as an issue," she says. "I never once felt that I couldn't do the work. Although sometimes I may have been tested to see if I could do the job physically, like hand mowing and weeding, I enjoyed being physically tired at the end of the day."

The first day Andrea Bakalyar reported to work as a golf course crew member, she said she was hooked immediately. Since her father once told her that he didn't think girls could work at golf courses, Bakalyar wrote on her application that she could work as hard as any man, just in case her father's comments reflected the prevailing attitude. When Bakalyar told friends and family she was going to school in turf management, they warned her she wouldn't get as far nor move up as fast as a man. After four years working on courses and earning her golf course management certificate

## The idea of women as superintendents isn't as unusual as you might think.



People warned Andrea Bakalyar she wouldn't move up as fast as a man. They were wrong.

from the University of Maryland last spring, however, she now is superintendent for Montgomery CC in Laytonsville, Md.

Bakalyar attributes her success to a love of the work and her dedication, not that she set out to prove a woman could do the job.

"Some people say it drove me because I was a woman and had something to prove," Bakalyar says. "They don't understand that it was because I found something I really liked, so I had the drive [to succeed], which possibly opened doors for me."

### Find a mentor

Many women superintendents credit their success to the encouragement of a male superintendent who taught them the skills required for the job. Denise Kispert, superintendent of Highland GC in St. Paul, Minn, recalled how her first supervisor, Bob Grew,



had total confidence in her abilities. Grew supervised Kispert at St. Paul's Nine Hole GC.

"He just said, 'You can do it,' and he taught me how to run tractors and aerators and payloaders," Kispert says appreciatively. "He spent the time to teach me. He would take me out on the greens and say, 'Look at this disease. Look at the weather conditions,' and it really sparked my interest."

Richert believes she was chosen for her present position because of her mentor, Bruce Klinkner, then superintendent of Oak Glen CC in Stillwater, Minn.

"He trained me to work on the irrigation system," Richert says. "He wanted someone who was a perfectionist and who he wouldn't have to check up on all the time. He spent the time to train me in on all the equipment."

At her small private course, Richert needs mechanical knowledge and experience because she has to be plumber, carpenter and mechanic as well as turf manager.

Before women storm the walls of turf management schools, however, they should understand the sacrifices that can accompany the career of successful superintendents. They work long hours, and the time demands can strain even the strongest family ties. It takes a strong personality to handle such strains, so a woman should carefully examine the choices a career as a superintendent may force her to make.

"The absolute physical demands of time influences anybody who goes into the profession," Beljan says.

At one point in Stephanie Tannone's college career, an advisor told her to go into horticulture rather than turf management because that's what women do. Tannone pursued turf management nevertheless.

"I'm glad I decided to do what I did and I like where I'm at," she says.

She manages an oceanside municipal course in Palm Beach, Fla., and has two children, ages 6 and 18 months. Though in her first few years at the municipal course it was difficult dealing with the lack of money for improvements, she realized city-owned courses allowed her the flexibility to raise a family. There are tradeoffs, of course, but Tannone says she's happy with the choice she has made.

"We all want to be at the big club and making all the money, but I'm much happier here and I like what I'm doing," she says. "[Private superintendents] spend a lot more time on the course than I do, and I don't work on the weekend. The avenue I took with a municipal course probably helped me."

Tannone is a realist about the necessity of being on hand for weather-related problems and sometimes working through long shifts, but believes her chosen profession also provides a wonderful backdrop for her children's lives.

"It's a great place for my kids to grow up; my 6 year old has been playing golf since he was 2," Tannone says.

Women superintendents believe their gender is not a factor in how they perform their jobs, and they feel they receive equal pay and enjoy positive support from male colleagues. With the rate of golf course construction at an all-time high, more qualified superintendents will be needed to run them. Danneberger believes that opens up new opportunities for women, and the profession improves when a work place diversifies.

"The greater diversity in a profession just makes it a better profession," Vargas says. "I'm optimistic about the future because I've not had one woman come back to me to say she didn't get a job because she was a woman."

Richert laughs off the mistaken identities her gender causes. "Once they know who I am, there's no problem," she says.

She's happy to be in a job she cherishes.

"When I graduated from college with my teaching degree and the superintendent position opened, I knew my heart was in golf course maintenance," Richert says. "It's what I want to do, and every morning I'm excited to get back on the golf course." ■

*Bridget Falbo is a freelance writer who lives in Albertville, Minn.*

## WOMEN HAVE THEIR ACTS TOGETHER

In 10 years as executive director of the Georgia GCSA, Karen White has found you don't have to be one of the guys to be successful in the golf course maintenance industry.

"I talk to a lot of male superintendents who enjoy having women on their work crews," White says. "They've found that women are more detail-oriented and perform their jobs as precisely as possible."

Despite that, there aren't many available head superintendent jobs for women — or men — to pursue in Georgia, White says. "But the industry needs assistants," she adds.

The Georgia GCSA has 10 female members, up from two in 1989. Total membership grew to 830 from 350 during the same time.

The Georgia GCSA isn't recruiting more women because they aren't available. The state's only two female superintendents are already members of the association.

D.J. King, former executive director of the California and San Diego associations, says there also wasn't a large increase in female members during her 12 years with San Diego and eight years with California.

"But as more women begin to play golf, the field will be introduced as a possibility," she adds. "I wouldn't say it's a growing trend, but there will always be women who like to work outdoors."

The San Diego chapter recently added its first woman, Candice Combs, to its board, and she had to be appointed. King says she hates to think the field is gender-biased, but is not convinced it isn't. "She ran three times and couldn't get elected," King says.

White says leaders at some of the older, established clubs remain chauvinistic. "But a lot of the (leaders at) younger clubs are more flexible in their thinking and probably wouldn't hesitate to hire a qualified woman as a superintendent," she adds.

That said, White would never want to be a superintendent and prefers her job as an information supplier to the association's members. She'll tell you where to find bentgrass sod, but she won't plant it.

"I wouldn't want the job for anything in the world," she says. "They're on call 24 hours a day and seven days a week. To try and raise a family and have that kind of responsibility would be overwhelming."

— Larry Aylward