

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR

# NANCY DICKENS HAS ENJOYED MANY HALLMARK MOMENTS AS A SUPERINTENDENT,

starting with her daring mid-life decision to ditch a desk job with the country's largest manufacturer of greeting cards.

As a female superintendent she is one of only 81 affiliated with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), yet she stresses this is one e-card that shouldn't be judged by its Flash cover. The profession is far from chauvinistic, she notes, and more women will opt to join the ranks once they discover that opportunities do exist. Despite being in the minority, female superintendents don't see sexism as an industry issue

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PHOTO BY: CHRIS MOONEY

"If young girls were to call me, I'd tell them it's the greatest job around," says Dickens, the certified superintendent at Kierland Golf Club in Scottsdale, Ariz. "Sometimes people just don't realize how many great jobs are out there. I think times are going to change. It just takes time."

Since 1999 the GCSAA's female membership has grown from 153 to 216. Among that number are 62 Class A superintendents, 19 superintendent members and 42 assistant members.

Dickens, 46, represents the rare superintendent — male or female — who can recount extensive firsthand experience in two distinctly different lines of work.

Several years after graduating from Baylor University with a degree in finance, Dickens joined Hallmark at its corporate headquarters in her hometown of Kansas City, Mo. As an inventory controller, she helped manage \$40 million of seasonal products for what she considered a "great, solid employer."

Five years later, her duties had become humdrum. Worse yet, she had a never-ending view outside the fish bowl.

"The grounds around the Hallmark facility are beautiful," Dickens says. "There are beautiful glass windows all around, and I'd just look out, going, 'Gosh, what am I doing here?' I didn't want to work the next 30 years behind a desk."

After several inquiries with local superintendents and a female superintendent in Florida, Dickens quit Hallmark at 32. Her mother and brothers and sister couldn't believe it. "I turned a few heads when I did that," Dickens says.

The decision led Dickens to Pinehurst, N.C., where she worked from the bottom up on the vaunted No. 2 course. Starting at \$5 an hour, she stayed at Pinehurst for three years while simultaneously earning a turf degree from North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

"It was a leap of faith in that I had never even actually worked on a golf course when I decided to do this," Dickens says. "Certainly there were moments when I thought, 'Wow, I hope I know what I'm doing.' But I had been around the game and I felt I did enough homework to know long-term what my goal was and what the industry was about."

Her goal: to become a superintendent. Dickens fulfilled that quest in 1996, moving from an assistant position at Mission Hills Country Club in Rancho Mirage, Calif., to superintendent of the club's Dinah Shore Tournament Course and Arnold Palmer Course. Just a year later she moved to Del Webb's Sun City Palm Desert community, where she spent five years "maintaining a small, little city." Her duties included the construction of a second 18-hole course, putting course, softball field and fishing lake.

Since 2002 Dickens has been employed by Troon Golf, first as the director of agronomy at the company's Westin Mission Hills Resort in Rancho Mirage and, since January 2005, as the superintendent at its Kierland *Continued on page 28*  "I've always been given opportunities. That next job has always been there for me."

~NANCY DICKENS~

# **Fair Play**

"There were a few men who said, 'I'm not working for no damn woman.' But that was a long time ago."

~CANDACE COMBS~

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club, where she manages 40 employees and a \$2 million budget.

Through 14 years in the maintenance industry, "I've always been given opportunities," Dickens says. "That next job has always been there for me. And it's been a pleasure to work for the people I work with."

Being a woman has neither hurt nor helped her cause, Dickens says. About the only act of sexism she has experienced occurred while filling divots alongside a somewhat crude crew member during her early days at Pinehurst No. 2.

"He looked at me one day — his language was somewhat coarse — and said, 'Now, I got a question for you: Why would someone hire a white woman like you when they can hire a white man like me?' He was very, very direct," Dickens says. "Since that point, (gender) has never been an issue.

"There's a perception that this is a maledominated business, which it is, but maybe I've been fortunate or blessed because it has never been a challenge to me. In fact, I've had guys that have left with me when I went to a new job. That's happened at two different jobs."

Likewise, gender hasn't been an issue for Candace Combs, the certified superintendent at Torrey Pines in San Diego. Her cause has been aided by the fact that Torrey Pines and Balboa Park, where she had worked for 30 years, are city-operated courses.

"Once you're in the municipal organization, they have rules about that. They have to treat you the same," Combs says. "In the beginning, way back when, there were a few men who said, 'I'm not working for no damn woman.' But that was a long time ago."

Andrea Bakalyar doesn't have it quite so easy while running two municipal courses in Knoxville, Tenn. One of the facilities, The Wee Course at Williams Creek, is located in a "very challenging neighborhood," she says, and her crew is comprised largely of young,



African-American males who "have a hard time taking leadership from a white woman."

"I'm in a culture where some of these young men don't even call their girlfriends by their first names. They call them, 'My baby's mother,'" Bakalyar says. "(But) it's not their fault that they've grown up in this environment. They're just victims of circumstances. These are guys who are pushing 30 and have never really held down regular jobs. They have several children and just haven't had an easy way through life."

Through it all, Bakalyar resists feeling sorry for herself if she's treated differently as a woman; nor does she feel like she has more to prove as a female superintendent.

"You have to take that 'I'm a woman' coat off," she says. "I am a woman. I can't change it. I'm not going to try to pretend I'm something I'm not. And people actually respond better to that than me trying to be something that I'm not."

Outside the municipal sector, Michelle Frazier-Feher credits her male colleagues with



helping her to reach her 10th anniversary this month as the certified superintendent at Boston Hills Country Club in Hudson, Ohio.

"The local association welcomed me with Continued on page 30

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*Continued from page 29* open arms," Frazier-Feher says. "They're like a big group of uncles and brothers."

Meanwhile, it took a little longer to find a husband willing to deal with the nuances of a superintendent's career, but Frazier-Feher, 34, eventually married in October.

"It does take awhile to find someone willing to deal with time schedule, and that's not just with a female (superintendent)," she says. "I found a wonderful, wonderful person. We work opposite schedules from each other, so when we get one day off a week together, we try to spend as much time together as possible."

As for her newly hyphenated surname, Frazier-Feher wasn't about to surrender one of the benefits to being the rare female in the industry.

"One of the positives is that hardly anyone ever forgets your name," she says. "You're not one of those people that actually blends into the crowd. A lot of people know me and have met me across the United States. So for business I started hyphenating."

Bakalyar, 35 and divorced after an early marriage, says she's at the point where the career vs. family question is persistent.

"Is it more important for me to become the *Continued on page 32* 

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"It's going to be an international hat-tip to women in the business."

~ANDREA BAKALYAR~

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first woman to serve on the board of directors of the GCSAA and maybe even be the president some day and have all these golf courses and work for the city of Knoxville? Or is it more important for me to be married eventually and have kids?" she asks. "I'm at a point where I have to consider that. I don't want to look back when I'm 70 years old and say, 'Well, I dedicated my entire life to my career and I didn't focus on what's important to me personally."

Combs has packed a lot into her career, including two children: Sam, 13, and Sierra, 12. She's a role model in more ways than one, as she'll become the first female superintendent to host a Major when the U.S. Open comes to Torrey Pines in 2008.

"The fact that she is diverse is going to get a lot of attention for women in the industry," Bakalyar says. "It's just a terrific, terrific opportunity that I'm 100 percent sure she has earned every bit of. I guarantee she's taken her gender-hat off and she's just focused on her goals. It's going to be an international hattip to women in the business."

Combs says she appreciates the opportunity to be such an influence, even though her job hasn't changed that much from her days at Balboa Park. About the only difference is that her crew has jumped in size to 35.

"I would hope that it might reach some young women that are wondering what they want to be when they grow up," she says. "I'm here by accident. I never thought that I wanted to be a golf course superintendent when I was growing up. I never even knew there was such a thing. Nobody ever asked, 'Why don't you become a golf course superintendent?'"

Instead, Bakalyar recalls a different question of yesteryear.

"I remember when I first started going to trade shows, I'd go up to get information and it's like, 'Oh, is your husband a superintendent?" Bakalyar says. "Now it's taboo, like when you don't want to ask a woman if she's pregnant."

