

# What He *Did* and *Didn't* Want In Life

By Lori Ward Bocher

Some people get to where they are in life by knowing what they want. Others get there by knowing what they don't want. For Kris Pinkerton, current WGCSA president, it has been a combination of both.

Kris, superintendent at Oshkosh Country Club, grew up on a dairy farm near Waupun, Wis. That's when he learned one thing he *didn't* want in life. "I chose at the age of 18 not to pursue dairy farming because of the tremendous stress I saw my father live with," he says. "Farming had been fairly prosperous for our family because we were pretty decent at it. But it was seven days a week, all day long, all the time. I just couldn't see myself doing that."

So when he graduated from high school in 1981, he knew what he *didn't* want to do. But he *didn't* know what he did want to do. "I was very uncertain of my destination at that time. To be honest with you, I was kind of lost for a while," Kris admits.

Consequently, he didn't pursue further education at this point. "I was looking for employment off the farm," Kris recalls. "That led me to a golf course. I started as Larry Karel's assistant at Rock River



Full time staff. L to R Back row: Jim Kinderman, Larry Karel, Gene Leuthold, Kevin Harmsen and Kris Pinkerton. Front row L to R: Seth Petersen, Paul Ziemann and Andy Putzer.

Country Club in Waupun." He *didn't* know it at the time, but the golf course position turned out to be something he *did* want in life because he's been at it ever since.

"I think it was the similarities between golf course work and farming, being outdoors, that kept me at it in the beginning," Kris explains. "At that age I didn't have the foresight to think that some day I would be my own superintendent. But I enjoyed the job very much, just loved working outdoors. There was a tremendous amount of gratification for me in grooming and manicuring the golf course. That inspired me to at least stay

with it long enough until I had some foresight to know that I wanted to continue in this career."

## Needed more education...

Kris's boss left the course in 1986, and Kris stayed on as an interim superintendent. He also took some night classes in horticulture and chemical application at Blackhawk Technical College in Janesville and in small engine mechanics at Moraine Park Technical College in Fond du Lac. "In 1987 I realized I was not in a position to continue as a superintendent without further education," he recalls. "So in the winter of 1987-88 I went to the University of Massachusetts for their two-month short course in turfgrass management."

This gave him the confidence he needed to stay on as superintendent at Rock River Country Club in Waupun. Then, in June of 1990, he moved on to a job as superintendent at Waupaca Country Club for three years. And in June of 1993 he moved to his present job at Oshkosh Country Club.

Although his education worked

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for him, Kris would not encourage others to take the same path. Why? "Because of how our business has changed," he answers. "And because it was an awful long struggle for me to get to where I am today. Most of my education I had to achieve by taking night classes. And I've taken a ton of GCSAA seminars to get CEUs. I got my certification in 1993. It's a very difficult row to hoe nowadays if you don't have the two- or four-year degree."

### ***Hungry for more experience...***

Once he knew what he *did* want to do in life and got the education he needed, Kris found that he was hungry for more experience. This hunger led him to his third place of employment, Oshkosh Country Club. "One of the things that led me to Oshkosh was the opportunity to do a lot of renovation and construction on the golf course," he says. "I was awfully hungry for that.

That was one of the big lures that brought me here."

Kris was "hungry" for renovation and construction projects for many reasons. One, he wanted the experience – to do something besides just maintaining a course. Two, he wanted to build his resume. And, three, he likes to keep busy. "I'm not the kind of guy who likes to sit still very much," he admits. "Since coming here seven years ago, we haven't sat still at all. There's been a tremendous amount of work done on this golf course. A project every year, and some real heavy-duty construction about every other year."

Oshkosh Country Club has 275 golfing members who play about 15,000 rounds of golf a season on the 18-hole course. Kris has only worked on private courses, and he prefers it that way. "I enjoy working for a board of directors," he

says. "And I think there's more job security with a private course. We've seen some public facilities – privately or publicly owned – change ownership or be leased to a management company. That leads to a lot of uncertainty and change for the professionals, be it the golf professional, the superintendent, or the clubhouse manager."

Kris has especially enjoyed the board of directors and green chairman he works with at Oshkosh. "It's been very comfortable here working for a board of directors that has a common goal and is working in a consistent direction as far as the golf course," he says. "They brought me here to upgrade the facilities, and we've maintained that direction for seven years. The one person who steers this golf course is the green chairman, Kurt Koepler, and we've had a good working relationship, too."

How does Kris maintain this good relationship? "For the most part, it's keeping the line of communication open at all times," he answers. "He always knows how he can get a hold of me, and I have three different telephone numbers to get a hold of him. I keep him aware of what's going on – not so much on a day-to-day basis, but when events change, especially those that influence revenue. Like the weather. If we have a flood, I'll tell him what's going on and when we predict carts will be let back on the course.

"We work on projects together. We work on budgets together. We go out together and look at things on the course," Kris continues. "But the main emphasis is on communication. And being honest. We're not always right. Sometimes we regret the decisions that we've made. But being honest will prevail in the end."

### ***Craved involvement...***

Once he was firmly entrenched in his profession, Kris found something else that he *did* want to do in



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his life: become involved in the WGCSA. He joined the board of directors in 1994. "I craved involvement at that time," he says. "I wanted to do my part. I wanted to know what was going on. I was excited about being a member of the organization, and I tried three years to get on the board but was unsuccessful. I was appointed to a position in 1994 when someone had to leave the board."

In 1995 he was on the education committee. In 1996 and 1997 he served as treasurer. "We put our records onto a computer program at that time, which was very exciting," Kris points out. "We made that transition very nicely. Those were two good years." In 1998 and 1999 he was vice president under Scott Schaller, the president. And in November of 1999 Kris was elected president of the organization.

In his first year as president, Kris has found much of his time taken up by national matters. "As much as possible, we've tried to keep our membership aware of the changes happening with the GCSAA and its PDI (Professional

Development Initiative)," Kris explains. "They're upgrading the requirements for Class A membership and placing a greater emphasis on the Class A superintendent."

"If this passes at the annual meeting in February, a Class A member will have to have a pesticide license or be able to pass a test provided by the national organization. Also, continuing education will now be mandatory for the Class A superintendent," Kris continues. "They're trying to make this a branded membership classification so they can hold it up higher, so they can say to employers, 'You know that you're getting a good superintendent with a Class A member.' These changes are very controversial. A lot of people don't like change."

And what does Kris think of these changes? "With the issue of ongoing requirements for continuing education, I feel this is a positive change," he answers. "The golf course profession is dynamic with technological advancements and increasing superintendent responsibilities. The need for ongoing

education, as little as 10 hours per year, demonstrates that Class A superintendents are actively seeking education to stay abreast of the latest developments.

"As for the requirement to have a current pesticide license or be required to take the proficiency exam, we should have done that years ago," Kris continues. "We are the environmental stewards of the property we manage. Hopefully taking this proactive step will help



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GCSAA when they have to meet with environmentalist groups or regulatory agencies.”

#### **Goals for WGCSA...**

For his upcoming year as president, Kris has specific goals. “First and foremost is to continue providing membership services to the best of our ability as a board of directors,” he says. “I think we’ve done a fairly decent job of that. But, with changes in the direction of our national organization, we need to better position ourselves as a state organization so that we can provide more services in a more timely manner.”

For example, Kris would like to shorten the amount of time it takes to get new members on board. “When a new member’s application

comes in, I’d like to be able to turn it over quickly,” he explains. “Get the welcome letter out. Get meeting notices, *The Grass Roots* and everything else to them so they’re welcomed in a timely manner. Right now we don’t send anything out until after the board of directors has had a meeting to vote new members in.

“But it’s hard to get nine volunteers together at one time to conduct business, especially in the summer,” he adds. “I would like to be able to take care of business more efficiently and in a more timely manner. This quite possibly could mean changes in how we do business. Because we are all volunteers, we may need to look at hiring an executive secretary or executive director somewhere

down the road.”

Another goal is to make sure the WGCSA is generating enough income for turfgrass research. “A tremendous amount of work has been put into the OJ Noer Research Center – developing the building, buying the land for the plots,” Kris realizes. “And a great deal of work has been put into getting and keeping qualified professors and researchers into each of the departments.

“We as an organization must make sure there’s money here to support research,” he continues. “Research benefits golf course superintendents more than any other group in the WTA (Wisconsin Turfgrass Association), I believe. We’ve always supported research, but



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the issue needs to be addressed a little harder next year.”

What are some of his ideas to increase research revenue? “Broadening our membership base, without raising dues, for the sole purpose of generating research funds may be a viable option,” Kris answers. “We have had the good fortune of seeing tremendous membership growth these past five years without any structured membership recruitment. Maybe it’s time to knock on some new doors!”

**Doing his best...**

“There are always a lot of issues to deal with because we’re in such a diverse business and things are always changing,” Kris says. “Our board is being pulled in lots of directions. My philosophy is to do the best that you can with what you have to work with, and to try to do what’s right for as many people as you can. Along the way you’re going to make somebody mad or upset. But that’s part of life.”

When he’s not on the course or at a board meeting, Kris has an unusual hobby: skeet shooting. “I’ve been doing that for four years now,” he says. And how did he get started with skeet? “I work with quite a few hunting enthusiasts,” he explains. “We decided one time that we were getting kind of bored over the winter, and maybe we ought to shoot trap. The trap idea led to checking out the skeet field. Once my assistant, Jim Kinderman, tried skeet, it’s been all skeet ever since. We shoot registered now (targets recognized by the National Skeet Shooting Association). It has taken over what valuable time that we do have left over.”

Kris also spends time with his family. His wife, Michelle, is a junior accountant with the Menasha Corporation. They have two children – Natasha, 11, and Hunter, 3.

Today, nearly 20 years after graduating from high school and knowing only that he *didn’t* want



Wife Michelle, daughter Natasha, age 11 and son Hunter, age 3.

to farm, Kris is a much more confident and self assured young man. Slowly but surely, he has discovered what he *does* want to do in life. And he’s taken the steps that

have led him to a satisfying career, good relationships with his colleagues, and a chance to be involved – to do his part for – his profession. ♣



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