37TH ANNUAL

whatcom BUSINESS AWARDS

BLACK & GOLD GALA

THE BEST CELEBRATION TO HONOR THE BEST OF WHATCOM BUSINESS

At Whatcom Business Alliance, we believe in celebrating the entrepreneurs and leaders, innovators and employers who make careers and livelihoods possible for thousands in our stunning Pacific Northwest place. When you're the one out in front — investing a nest egg or millions, writing your business plan and a marketing one too, motivating your workforce while interpreting changing markets — you deserve to have your story told and a toast raised for your business acumen and belief in your community.

For 37 years, the WBA has hosted the best celebration of Whatcom business at a generous and lavish gala event, replete with drinks and dinner, high-production video spotlights and awards, and importantly, lots of recognition.

Here are the nominees from 2023:

Let's start with the bravest entrepreneurs, nominees for Start-up of the Year, those who launched businesses in 2023. For music lovers and artists, a nationwide resurgence in vinyl records inspired a downtown Bellingham independent record label and store. On Squalicum Harbor, an established, third-generation, local jeweler set up a stunning, upscale, elegant, fine-jewelry boutique, drawing rave reviews. In Sunnyland, an experienced chef launched an elevated, organic, and local meal subscription service so that families can enjoy plant-based cuisine in their own homes. And two brothers started their family-owned, local pest control company, with hallmarks of no hidden fees, upsells, or scare tactics — transforming unfriendly situations by friendly service.

We look to Small Business of the Year nominees for their staying power. Your favorite resort, spa, or vacation getaway probably sources luxe linens from this company in Ferndale. Smart design and elegant construction — inspired by faith — fuel a Lynden-based renovation company. Crafting custom cabinets for contractors and homeowners is the thoughtful work of another family legacy business. And only in the Fourth Corner: this business offers crewed yacht charters — through the Inside Passage, San Juan Islands, and to Alaska — aboard a restored passenger boat.

Here are the leaders who make companies successful, the nominees for Business Person of the Year. One leads a local credit union with 80 years of history of banking neighbor to neighbor. Another talent manages a favorite, longtime, local hardware business. One candidate leads a full-service facility maintenance company. The final nominee manages construction projects, asphalt paving, industrial maintenance and refinery services.

Read their stories and join us in celebrating the nominees and winners on March 15!

SPECIAL THANKS

BCS BELLINGHAM COLD STORAGE

bp

Larson Gross CPAs & Consultants

TRADEWINDS CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

These local businesses join WBA to congratulate this year's nominees

As part of the 37th Annual Whatcom Business Awards, we honor the innovative

ACRISURE AN EXTRAORDINARY ADVANTAGE℠

ALL4

AMS PRINT SPECIALISTS PRINT · MAIL · LABEL

CASCADE NATURAL GAS CORPORATION A Subsidiary of MDU Resources Group, Inc. In the Community to Serve®

CASCADE RADIO GROUP

The Chrysalis Inn & Spa CURIO COLLECTION BY HILTON

HARDWARE SALES

HOTEL BELLWETHER LIGHTHOUSE GRILL BELLINGHAM BAY

The INN AT LYNDEN

PCR PACIFIC CONTINENTAL REALTY LLC

SATURNA CAPITAL

SILVER REEF CASINO RESORT

TO OUR SPONSORS

Peoples Bank

Chocolate Necessities

Semiahmoo Resort · Golf · Spa

WRS

Bellingham Seafeast

for helping improve the economic and civic vitality of Whatcom County.

entrepreneurs, job creators and risk-takers who enhance our community.

Barron — Improving Lives

BDR Driving Profit & Growth

BECU

dawson — Quality People / Quality Work

Elements | Hospitality

First Fed

Little Caesars

Mills Electric — Since 1911

Neeter — House of Luxury

North Coast Credit Union

transOCEAN Products

Walton Beverage

WBA — Whatcom Business Alliance

START-UP OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

Left to right: Kristofer Elling, Tyson Elling and Evan Friese. PHOTO: Sattva Photo

SASQUATCH PEST CONTROL

All in the family

Brothers bring transparency to pest removal process

Matt Benoit

Kris and Tyson Elling have made careers from getting rid of the insects, spiders and rodents that gross out homeowners and potentially destroy the structures they've worked so hard to obtain.

In 2022, the brothers joined forces to create Sasquatch Pest Control — a company with a memorable logo and honest communication. Kris, 38, and Tyson, 41, previously worked together at a local pest control business in Bellingham before venturing out on their own.

"In those efforts with the other company, we kind of learned the majority of what we needed to know to do this," Tyson Elling said. "The meat and potatoes of the work was something we'd been doing for a long time. We can now be in complete control of our destiny."

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic brought both brothers to crossroads in their lives in 2021: Kris Elling and his wife were considering a move to Arizona (where the broth-

ers grew up), and Tyson Elling found himself working dissatisfying jobs in Seattle because he couldn't find better local work.

After a year and a half of saving money, Tyson decided to start his own business. When Kris found himself priced out of the Arizona housing market, he stayed in Whatcom County to join his brother's new company.

"We were very well received by the community," Tyson Elling said. "Things got started a lot quicker than we expected. It's kind of been go, go, go since then."

The company had $350,000 in revenue last year — a 140% increase from its first year in business — while having just one full-time employee in addition to the brothers. Kris said the company is hoping to hit $700,000 in revenue this year, with plans to hire another full-time pest control specialist.

Sasquatch Pest Control does all manner of pest removal, including ants, bees, spiders, roaches, termites, bedbugs and rodents. As long as it's not wildlife — possums, raccoons and their ilk require additional licensure and protocols — they can handle it.

What makes Sasquatch unique, the brothers said, is a willingness to do things other companies aren't willing to spend time on. The company has partnered with other local businesses to recommend one another, meaning that if Sasquatch specialists find something out of their wheelhouse, they'll tell the customer about a solution.

"If you tap into that sense of community and let people know you're here to do a good, honest service for them, they will definitely respond." —Kris Elling

"There are some things where we have to collaborate with others in order to really get that full control and actually solve the customer's problem, rather than just mitigating," Kris said.

Spending extra time to explain how to consistently keep a pest problem at bay so they don't have to come back too often, Tyson added, also earns high marks from customers.

"Being able to provide the solution for our customers — and find ways to save them money — is something else that they appreciate as well," he said.

Owning and operating their own business has given both brothers a better quality of life, they said, allowing them greater ability to handle their roles as husbands and family members without having to beg for days off from a boss.

They have big goals for the business, including a hope they might one day franchise their business across a three-state footprint.

"I don't want to aim small," Kris Elling said. "I want to aim very, very big."

In the meantime, bringing on and retaining quality employees is their short-term focus.

"I don't want people to kind of feel like they're capped out in our company," Kris said. "I want them to feel like there's unlimited growth potential. If they're willing to grow the business and put in the work, we're willing to grow with them and try to get them to their farthest potential, up to owners."

To anyone hoping to go into business for themselves, the brothers' advice is simple: Learn everything you can, especially sales cycle optimization and marketing.

"What you learn very quickly as a business owner is that you can be the best guy in the field you can be, but if you can't market correctly and you can't reach out to your customer base and you can't compete in the digital marketspace, you're useless," Kris Elling said. "The guy that's getting found on Google is the guy that's getting hired."

For those who can truly connect with their service area, he added, the future will be bright.

"If you tap into that sense of community and let people know you're here to do a good, honest service for them," Kris said, "they will definitely respond." ■

START-UP OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

NEETER HOUSE OF LUXURY

Luxury as excellence, not expense

Local jeweler's boutique offers big-city quality

Matt Benoit

To many people, the word "luxury" is synonymous with "expensive." But that's not how Bellingham's John Neeter interprets its meaning when it comes to his livelihood.

"I focus on quality," said the 48-year-old jeweler, who has spent the past 30 years — essentially his entire adult life — in the Whatcom County jewelry industry.

Since opening in November 2022, Neeter House of Luxury has provided the community with upscale, elegant jewelry options at a boutique showroom near Bellingham's scenic Squalicum Harbor. The business did more in sales in 2023 than its goal for the year — more than twice as much, in fact — and has racked up more than 100 five-star reviews online.

"The community has really responded well," Neeter said. "(They're) finding big-city merchandise in our wonderful town of Bellingham."

Neeter House of Luxury offers everything from colored gemstones and diamond engagement rings to Rolex watches, precious metals, luxury bags and knives and all manner of other jewelry items. The store works to bring in fashion jewelry unlikely to be found in any other local stores. A substantial amount of money and technology was

spent to set up a meticulous in-house production process, from an item's initial design to its casting and setting.

Neeter — who spent years with his family's local precious metals and jewelry business before taking time off and then branching out on his own — says his favorite thing about jewelry is what it can mean to the person receiving it.

"We sell love," he said. "(Jewelry is) a special gift, and it's something to pass down through generations. You cannot go wrong when someone opens a box and you see the smile on their face. You can't be unhappy in this business."

Neeter's plan wasn't necessarily to re-enter the retail jewelry business; he originally had the goal of simply being a private jeweler. But when the opportunity to obtain space overlooking the harbor and the majesty of Bellingham Bay came up, he called his wife and told her he'd changed his mind.

Now, Neeter has not only a showroom but an office in which to sit with customers, listen to what they want, and learn who they are. Forging relationships with clients is, he said, his favorite part of the job.

"My customers aren't just a number to me," Neeter said. "I want to be not just their jeweler; I want to be their family's jeweler."

He particularly enjoys seeing younger people visit, sometimes with parents, to pick out engagement rings or wedding bands. Neeter also is more than happy to use his curated network of suppliers across the country to shop for what clients want if he doesn't have it on hand.

When asked what lessons he's learned after building his own business, Neeter said it's important not to be scared.

"If you have the right plan of attack, I think it's wonderful," he said. "There's nothing like being a business owner. You've got to work hard at it. Most people think that people who are business owners kind of have it made. But you don't see all the hours we put in on the backside to make it work."

Neeter House of Luxury currently has five full-time employees and soon will be adding several more. The business has a five-year plan, Neeter said, and may expand in its current location should it become possible. Doing so would allow more space for the design team, with desks for each of those team members.

"I definitely have big aspirations for what I'm going to build here for this community," Neeter said. ■

AMS
PRINT & LABEL SPECIALISTS
x
FUNKY'S HOT SAUCE FACTORY

AMS COULDN'T BE PROUDER TO PARTNER WITH FUNKY'S HOT SAUCE AS A LABEL PROVIDER AND FELLOW WHATCOM COUNTY BUSINESS.

Matthew at Funky's Hot Sauce came to AMS in February of 2020 looking to partner with a local label provider for his new and exciting products. Since then, we have watched with amazement the tremendous growth of Funky's and we are fortunate to be a part of their success!

AMS works diligently in choosing the right label material to make the product stand out on shelves. We provide printed samples so there is no doubt the final product is exactly what Matt is expecting.

FUNKY'S HOT SAUCE SUCCESS IS OUR SUCCESS!

ON SEASON 23 OF HOT ONES!

AMS PRINT & LABEL SPECIALISTS
360-332-2500
www.ams-print.com
880 Grant Avenue · Blaine, WA 98230

PRINT WITH AMS
ON YOUR NEXT LABEL ORDER.

START-UP OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

BLACK NOISE RECORDS

Underground collective, independent store

Used record store upholds musical love and artistic ownership

Matt Benoit

Nico Sanchez loves records. The 31-year-old Western Washington University graduate and musician has been collecting vinyl — that time-tested medium of superior musical sound — for over a decade.

"I probably have a few thousand records at this point," he said. "It's hard to put an exact number on it."

It's that love of records, and what they stand for, that led Sanchez to create Black Noise Records, the independent record label and store that finds its home along Bay Street inside the 1909 Bellingham Hardware Building.

Sanchez, who grew up in the Issaquah area before moving to Bellingham to attend WWU, graduated in 2016 from Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies with a degree in music, business and cultural studies. His time studying was augmented by the creation of a Black Noise Records music label after meeting like-minded student artists creating underground, instrumental hip-hop.

"We were just kind of doing things as a collective, throwing shows together and making music together," he recalled. "I was just looking for a

way to put a name behind what we were doing."

But it wasn't until the summer of 2021 that Black Noise took on a brick-and-mortar existence. Sanchez had a friend who'd founded Bay Street's Geheim Gallery, and when the space next to it became available for rent, Sanchez decided to take the leap. He used extra funds saved up during the pandemic, along with help from a business-savvy sister in Seattle, to open Black Noise as a used records store.

"I had seen the demand behind used records and the interest across all age ranges and demographics," he said. "I really just tried to create something that I always felt was missing or that the Bellingham community needed."

Sanchez said opening Black Noise also gave him a chance to provide the community with a young, minority-owned business that represents the things he likes — something he felt was previously lacking.

Black Noise buys, sells and trades used vinyl and also sells vinyl pressings of Black Noise Records artists, including Sanchez himself. Customers can find high-quality original records at affordable prices when they stop in, whether they're a cultured aficionado or a casual music lover.

"We're experienced and knowledgeable buyers that try and buy ethically and honestly and give people fair prices for music that's been enjoyed," he said. "I think we just encapsulate the kind of culture of people that love records and producing music."

In an age of digital products and interaction, physical items such as merchandise and vinyl records are a way for musicians to take tangible ownership of their art, Sanchez said. The people buying these products stimulate the economy of independent artists directly, as opposed to receiving a mere fraction of what major distributors or streaming platforms make when people stream their music.

Black Noise currently has four employees, though Sanchez is the only one who can be considered full time. His only goal, he said, is to continue the mission of Black Noise as a tangible testament to musical love and independent art.

Although he said an increase in sales has been present year-over-year, becoming a small business owner has not been without struggle. Sanchez said opening during the pandemic was hectic at times, and acquiring the funding, inventory and equipment necessary was challenging. But the result, he added, was worth it.

"It's been super rewarding and fulfilling to me, just to be able to create a community and know I'm contributing positive things to the community," he said. "These are the kind of places that keep culture alive, that keep community alive in the area, as opposed to things like Amazon."

Budding entrepreneurs like himself, Sanchez said, should go into business for themselves for the right reasons, seeking to fulfill needs they genuinely feel are missing from their own communities.

"Do things ethically and honestly," he said, "and treat people well. Try to create a sense of community, and you'll go far." ■

START-UP OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

PLANTAGE

The culinary evolution of feel-good flavor

Plantage's healthy meal service keeps Whatcom families fed

Matt Benoit

Chris Wilson does not like being called a "foodie." Whatever one chooses to call her, however, one thing is clear: Her life has been filled with a true passion for food and the role it plays in people's lives.

Since January 2023, Wilson has served as owner and head chef at Plantage, a meal service business tucked into the heart of Bellingham's Sunnyland neighborhood. Plantage provides scratch-made vegetarian meal plans, picked up weekly, that are both delicious and healthy.

"The passion I want to share with the world is that plants are really nourishing and amazing and super great for the environment," Wilson said. "I'm really trying to bridge that gap between fine dining — elevated food, plated up with garnishes and textures and colors and flavor layers — and have this beautiful plate of food that happens to be made from plants."

Wilson, who is originally from Oklahoma, graduated from college with a mathematics degree before en-

rolling in culinary school in Houston, Texas. She then entered the professional world, cheffing at multiple fine dining restaurants in the Houston area.

When she met her husband and started a family, Wilson hung up her professional chef's apron and relocated to Seattle for five years. Six years ago, the family moved again to Bellingham, and Wilson attempted to re-enter the job market and use her math degree.

It proved more challenging than she'd hoped, and being a traditional chef as a staunch vegan represented a personal conflict of interest. Wilson wound up creating Plants 2 Plates, a local personal chef service she helmed with assistant chef Abigail Bruno.

While successful and enjoyable, the business also involved a lot of driving and food waste, Wilson said. Since becoming a mother to three boys, her food interests had also evolved — from food as entertainment and spectacle to food as sustaining nourishment.

In 2022, Wilson founded Plantage, leasing a newly built space in the Sunnyland neighborhood and spending nine months building out a new commercial kitchen there. Working with Bruno, Wilson offered her Plants 2 Plates client base the chance to be Plantage's first customers. She expanded to fully public offerings in January 2023.

With a full-time staff of herself and Bruno, plus three part-time employees (including one of her teenage sons), Wilson has built a subscriber base of about 80 people, ranging from seniors and young adults to busy families, and hopes to double her client base in the near future. Last year, the business had $400,000 in gross revenue.

Plantage
fast, healthy, delicious meals

> "The passion I want to share with the world is that plants are really nourishing and amazing and super great for the environment."
>
> —Chris Wilson

"I've found (Whatcom County) to be super welcoming to small business," Wilson said. "I feel like people here really value seeing who they're doing business with and keeping money locally. I think it's a great place for someone who's passionate to start a business up."

Plantage has a catalog of about 700 recipes, all of which were rewritten last year to be scaled up for commercial-size cooking. Its meal system changes weekly, meaning customers constantly receive new menus throughout their subscriptions. Wilson intentionally built the kitchen to be open air, so that customers can see how their food is made and prepared.

Most ingredients are made from scratch, including cashew- and hemp-based milks. All the business's produce is organic, as is about 90% of its pantry. Plantage also seeks to generate as little waste as possible, composting most of its preparation refuse. Its packaging is also fully compostable, and Wilson provides a bin outside the building for customers to return their packaging if they don't compost at home.

All of this results in a slimmer profit margin compared to bigger, more commercialized meal service companies that also produce a much larger carbon footprint. But Wilson's attention to fresh and environmentally friendly details is simply part of Plantage's overall mission.

"Everything that you get is fresh," she said. "It's guaranteed to last from this Thursday to next Thursday, so you can have all of your dinners taken care of for the entire week by only coming in once."

For new small-business owners, Wilson's advice is to be realistic about both market and risk. She originally wanted to open a café that would serve as a community gathering space, but she became aware that it wasn't a viable option and pivoted.

"You have to look outside of what you think (your market) should be and what you want it to be and what you hope it is," she said. "You have to get real with it and base it on fact. You can't really do 'build it and they will come.' Because they may or may not come. You have to really kind of know what you're getting into." ■

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

ELEMENTS HOSPITALITY

Success is equal parts culture and business

Putting energy into a healthy society is a key element of hospitality

Tamara Anderson-Loucks

As co-owner and CEO Tim Broersma explains it, Elements Hospitality was created by accident when he recognized an opportunity to take over a remodel project for a resort in Birch Bay that hadn't been going so well. He pitched his idea for a new business opportunity to then employer (now partner) Greg Neufeldt of Lynden Floor Design.

For several years, the two worked together, in partnership with Lynden Floor Design, to remodel vacation properties. Because the market and the work they were doing was so different, in 2007 Elements Hospitality was established as a separate company. Over the next 17 years, Elements evolved into a nationwide, multimillion-dollar organization renowned for its expertise in "live environment" renovations. However, success didn't come without significant pain — and out of the pain, a new corporate culture was born.

"It wasn't a clear or specific vision in the beginning," Broersma said. "It was blood, sweat, tears and hard learning. We fumbled along, figured out what we were best at, and the business grew from there."

As the company's growth continued, in 2016, then-CEO Shane Bajema and then-CFO Todd Rawls shifted the company's focus from solely an entrepreneurial business to a disciplined, more sustainable business model, building a culture that focused on the values they believed in, including honesty, integrity and compassion. They adopted a new company philosophy: "50% culture, 50% business."

> "It was blood, sweat, tears and hard learning. We fumbled along, figured out what we were best at, and the business grew from there."
> — CEO Tim Broersma

In 2017, sales doubled — and the company imploded.

Broersma explained: "We didn't have the capacity to manage that level of growth. It caused intense stress and challenge, exposing that our newly set disciplines, goals and culture had not fully taken root."

Over the next two years, leadership focused on stability and adhering to the principles and values established in 2016. Growth was slower yet consistent, the company made more money, and the culture and sense of identity became more intrinsic throughout the company. The adoption of this cultural shift is what Broersma says is his proudest achievement.

"The work to make this shift happen was difficult as we pushed through a tough time in our company's history," he said. "It took focused effort to find our company's purpose and to help our team embrace that purpose. Because of that work, we now have a team of aligned people who fight for each other, for our culture, for their teams around the country and for our relationships with our customers."

This culture of compassion extends beyond the workplace, with hundreds of thousands of dollars donated to charitable organizations yearly, particularly to those with both spiritual and humanitarian sides, such as Agape International Missions and International Saints and Abolitionists, global and local organizations working to stop sex trafficking.

Elements Hospitality, co-owned by Broersma and partners Neufeldt and Brian Davidson, earned $61.5 million in revenues in 2023, a 32% increase over 2022. The company employs 76 full-time workers, approximately two-thirds of them located in Whatcom County.

The company renovates hotels, resorts, timeshares and senior living facilities in the United States that are primarily owned by large real estate investment trusts, endowments and investment groups. Current projects span the country, though the majority are on the west coast and in Hawaii.

Elements Hospitality's approach to renovation — a methodology called live environment renovation — is what makes the company unique in its industry. While most construction companies renovate in a way that disrupts their clients' business, Elements Hospitality's approach is different.

"We sit down with our clients and create a schedule that limits how, when and where we work, so construction impact is as limited as possible for their guests on site," Broersma said. "The renovation may take longer, but our client is still operating; they don't have to close rooms and lay off employees. They're still making money, and guests don't feel impacted. It's a win for everyone."

Broersma said 2024 will be a year of stabilization and balance, with a push for planned, substantial growth in 2025 and 2026. That growth includes continued staff development, the hiring of additional team members, national diversification (with an emphasis on the east coast), and opening offices in Orlando and Hawaii.

While the results of Elements Hospitality's work have received repeated recognition on Conde Nast magazine's list of top hotels and resorts in the country, such acknowledgment isn't the company's most notable accomplishment, Broersma said.

"Our most notable accomplishment is our focus on culture and relationships, both inside and outside our walls," he said. "We've built something meaningful: a family. Staff vacation together, and customers vacation with us. If someone moves or there is a problem on the jobsite, others willingly jump in to help. We've developed nearly 20-year relationships with corporate customers, which isn't the norm in our industry. This is the accomplishment — it's the dynamic that makes us successful." ■

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

Mia Richardson with daughter Jessica Carrington. PHOTO: Sattva Photo

COMPHY CO

Sustainable luxury on a comfortable rise

From spa linens to home sleep goods, anyone can now get 'comphy'

Tamara Anderson-Loucks

As a spa director, Mia Richardson was immersed in an industry dedicated to providing a relaxing and lavish experience for its customers. Yet she noticed that same dedication to luxury did not extend to the linens, which were typically either hand-me-down hotel room sheets or regular home bedding sheets. Recognizing an opportunity, she set out on a path to create a new market for "spa linen," using materials that would be pleasing to the eye, plush and soft and that could withstand the rigors of industrial laundry — yet with low environmental impact to complement the wellness industry. In 2003, after nearly two years of research and development, Ferndale's Comphy Co was born. Twenty years later, the company is the leading provider of luxury linens for the hospitality market.

It took Richardson and her team a year and a half to develop proprietary fabrics for a niche market like the spa industry. The linens needed to be durable, wrinkle free and able to release

stains from the oils and other treatment products that permeate the fabric. Yet the fabric also needed to have a luxurious feel, drape well and meet unique spa-specific design challenges.

"At the time, there weren't products uniquely made for treatment tables," said Richardson, the company's founder and CEO. "So, we created accessible skirting that covered all four sides, hiding unsightly storage under the tables, and gave the tables a finished look."

Richardson committed everything in her heart and soul — and bank account — to the fledgling company, and in the early days she temporarily moved into the warehouse, living and working the business 24/7. Comphy Co's first customer was the Ritz Carlton, and within a year, numerous early adaptors bought into her newly created market for specialty spa linens.

As spa clients noticed the softness and quality of the linens, they reached out to Comphy Co to ask about purchasing linens for their home. To take advantage of this new opportunity, Richardson developed product lines for home-size bedding and launched first into the bed and breakfast market in 2008.

Today, Comphy Co is recognized worldwide as a leading provider of luxury linens for the hospitality industry — including spas, vacation rental properties, small boutique hotels and large hotel chains — as well as chiropractic offices and yoga retreats.

In 2023, Comphy Co revenues topped $10 million, only a slight increase over 2022 sales due to the company's focus on investing in new markets rather than on revenue growth. The company employs 26 full-time staff in Whatcom County, with about 10 full-time employees located in California. Clientele is predominantly in the Americas, with customers like the Four Seasons and the Ritz utilizing Comphy Co products in their resorts worldwide. Comphy Co ships worldwide from its factory in Ferndale. The company recently merged with Coop Sleep Goods, Richardson said, to provide spa-quality bedding direct to retail consumers on a larger scale.

> "We help walk you through purchase decisions, work to resolve issues quickly, to make sure our clients are happy."
> — Jessica Carrington

"Any business with wellness at its core or where there is a bed, we provide linens," said Jessica Carrington, general manager of business-to-business sales. "While sheets are our core foundation, we try to be a one-stop shop for luxury linens and textiles for work or home. The recent partnership with Coop puts us on track to be a household name for sleep."

Going forward, the Comphy Co team is focused on expanding the brand to new markets and developing new innovative textiles and products. Their goal is to be recognized as the best place to go for a good night's sleep.

"Cross development, bringing the two brands together, will be very exciting," Carrington said. "We have big news to announce in coming months."

Carrington and Richardson agree that Comphy Co's most notable accomplishments are the multiple Innovate Awards bestowed by the International Spa Association, and the company's customer base, 97% of whom are on the Forbes Travel Guide Star Award List.

Beyond the specialized fabrics, what makes Comphy Co unique is its commitment to customer service — the foundation of the company's philosophy.

"If you call, you reach a live body," Carrington said. "We help walk you through purchase decisions, work to resolve issues quickly, to make sure our clients are happy."

Giving back to the community is another core value of the Comphy Co brand. The Comphy Gives Back program provides products like bedding and towels to shelters and clothing banks and works closely with school districts to ensure families in need have bedding and linens.

While Comphy Co's continued success, reputation for quality and industry accolades are something any business owner would be proud of, Richardson says she is most proud of establishing a brand and creating a completely new market in the world of hospitality. Yet with all she's achieved professionally, Richardson remains humble.

"Even when receiving recognition, it feels awkward," she said. "It's unique for us to talk about ourselves." ■

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

Left to right: Eric Van Hofwegen, Brad Kuik and Jason Van Hofwegen. PHOTO: Sattva Photo

HIGHCRAFT CABINETS

Cabinetmaking craft ingrained in their heritage

How HighCraft serves its clients and honors a family tradition

Tamara Anderson-Loucks

A heritage of craft cabinetmaking that started in 1978 with Bob Van Hofwegen's one-man custom cabinet shop, Van's Cabinets, is today a multimillion-dollar enterprise, HighCraft Custom Cabinets, under the leadership of Bob's two sons, Eric and Jason Van Hofwegen, and their business partner, Brad Kuik. The partners attribute the Ferndale-based company's success to its mission to provide a culture of excellence for both its customers and employees — a core value based on the relationship-building legacy of Van's Cabinets. Yet had it not been for a conversation over a glass of beer, the highly successful venture would not be in existence today.

In the late 1990s, the Van Hofwegen brothers joined their father's growing custom cabinetry business. Over the next 20 years, they honed their woodworking craft and learned the processes it takes to run a successful business and the value of building relationships. In late 2017, with Bob's retirement on the horizon, the busi-

ness was at a crossroads.

"I'd worked at Vans for over 20 years," Eric Van Hofwegen said. "Jason and I were doing everything ourselves, and I was getting disinterested. Brad and I met for a beer to talk about our future interests, and by the end of the discussion, the seeds were planted to combine our experience and start HighCraft."

Kuik proposed the idea to shift to a manufacturing-focused business, still providing high-quality custom cabinetry yet on a larger scale.

In January 2018, the business partnership officially formed. The partners purchased $200,000 of equipment, leased a larger building and started hiring employees.

Today, Jason Van Hofwegen serves as sales manager, while Eric Van Hofwegen is the production manager and Brad Kuik manages business development. The company employs 17 full-time team members, all Whatcom County residents, and earned revenues just shy of $4 million in 2023, a growth of approximately 20% over 2022. The company supplies custom cabinets to homeowners and small-to-large-scale residential and commercial contractors from King to Whatcom counties, although about 90% of its revenues are generated locally.

While HighCraft has realized continued growth since its inception just five years ago, the ownership's proudest achievement isn't financial — it's the creation of an entire new set of business systems, an extensive undertaking which the partners continue to refine.

Kuik explained: "All of Eric and Jason's knowledge was stored in their heads. We needed to establish written and visual systems and processes and assign team members to be responsible for them. As partners, we also defined our roles and stay within those roles."

Not solely a manufacturer, HighCraft Custom Cabinets also offers design services and installation, which opens additional opportunities to build relationships with customers. It's the partners building those relationships that makes the business unique.

"Our philosophy is to provide a very customer-focused experience, rather than a service," Kuik said. "Our sales staff walk the customer through the entire process, from the initial meeting to pricing, design and then to production. From that point, our production team works with the customer through the install. We strive to respond to phone calls and emails in minutes or hours, not days or weeks. This is what makes us unique."

While building relationships with customers is important, the partners believe at its core, creating a culture of excellence begins with ensuring their employees know they are valued, first and foremost, as individuals. Team members are encouraged to participate in the process, provide input and offer feedback.

"You won't find a top-down management style here," Kuik said. "We're not scared to have conversations about how we can do better. We want our team to love coming to work every day. If we take good care of our people, they take good care of our customers — then everyone wins."

Currently, the company operates out of two separate locations, but the partners are actively pursuing an approximately-200,000-square-foot facility to consolidate operations. Next, they'll be adding new equipment and scaling for future growth, with a goal to double or triple growth within five years.

HighCraft's success has created the financial opportunities to support a variety of local charities, including Engedi Refuge, which provides a haven for women who've experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking. HighCraft also supports the Lighthouse Mission, which helps break the cycle of homelessness, and provides both time and money to the Technic Training Center, which teaches woodworking industry technologies to high-school-age youth to help them develop skills for future career opportunities.

When asked what they believe is the company's most notable accomplishment to date, the partners say it's that they've maintained the culture of excellence, of relationship-building, that was important to Bob Van Hofwegen under his leadership at Van's Cabinets.

"This business started with Bob. It's his legacy. We try to honor that," said Jason Van Hofwegen. ■

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

NORTHWEST NAVIGATION

Life-changing experiences aboard the David B

Boutique charter company offers unique wilderness excursions

Tamara Anderson-Loucks

A combined love of wooden boats, operating passenger vessels and the great outdoors inspired the husband-and-wife team of Christine and Jeffrey Smith to found their Bellingham-based boutique charter company, Northwest Navigation, in 1998. However, launching the business was a long-term endeavor. It was a labor of love and commitment that took the couple eight years of hard work to restore a then-69-year-old wooden tow boat, the David B, before they were able to book their first passenger charter in 2006.

Starting the business, the couple's biggest commitment — and greatest challenge — was to acquire a suitable boat. After an extensive search, they found the 65-foot David B in Bristol Bay, Alaska. During the lengthy restoration, both worked other jobs. Jeffrey Smith sailed to Alaska as first mate for Western Towboat, and Christine Smith operated her own landscape business.

In June 2006, Northwest Navigation launched its inaugural charter, taking passengers through the San Juan Islands. The company made its first trip

to Alaska in July of that same year.

Today, Northwest Navigation employs three full-time staff — Jeffrey Smith, the captain; Christine Smith, the chef and naturalist (who also holds a U.S. Coast Guard 200-ton license); and a deckhand. The company had revenues of $525,000 in 2023, up 13.5% from 2022.

The company takes up to eight guests on eight-to-12-day adventure wilderness excursions through Alaska, the Inside Passage and the San Juan Islands. Its customer base is primarily passengers 50 to 70 years old, often retired, who enjoy connecting with nature. While most hail from Washington state, customers come from throughout the United States and internationally as well.

What makes cruising with Northwest Navigation unique is the company's small-scale approach, which allows for an exceptional level of personal attention. Customers experience a more intimate interaction with nature, free from crowds and in more remote areas inaccessible to larger vessels.

"Our flexibility is also unique," Christine Smith said. "We have an itinerary, but for example, if we come across a pod of whales, we can adjust our schedule so our customers can enjoy the experience."

For Jeffrey Smith, the company's most notable accomplishment was the restoration of the wooden boat, now nearly 100 years old. Christine wrote a book about the restoration: "More Faster Backwards," published in 2011. For Christine, the company's highlight has been the strong community of passengers Northwest Navigation has built over the years.

> "We love experiencing nature, and our philosophy is to be able to inspire others to have similar connections and take their appreciation of nature back home with them to enrich their lives."
> —Christine Smith

"In addition to going on trips, our customers also support us in other ways, like buying my books and volunteering their time to work on the boat," she said.

Renovations to the David B take place in the off-season, November through March. This year's projects include reconfiguring two staterooms into convertible queen or twin bed accommodations and adding a new skiff and a second generator.

The last major refit in 2008 involved the installation of an aluminum pilot house for a better customer experience. Not keen on assuming a $150,000 bank loan, the couple launched what they called their "Tin Hat Project," a customer-funded venture through which customers could provide small loans to be paid back with interest or with the interest portion paid back through trip credit or prepayment for future trips. In less than two weeks, the Smiths received more funds than they thought they'd need.

"About one-third chose to prepay for future trips," Jeffrey Smith said, "so very little had to be paid back as a loan. Financially, the project was the equivalent to the company's yearly gross revenue at the time, so for us it was a very big endeavor."

Given the April-to-October charter season, general boat maintenance and renovations, and other revenue-generating projects in the off-season, the couple manage a busy schedule. However, Christine makes the time to serve as a board member for the Working Waterfront Coalition of Whatcom County as board secretary, and as a board member/liaison for the charter, broker and passenger businesses sector of that organization. The Working Waterfront Coalition of Whatcom County promotes and preserves the vitality and economic benefits of the county's working waterfront..

When asked what the future holds, the Smiths said it's a question they ask themselves regularly, because now that they're in their mid-50s, they feel it is important to have an exit strategy. They hope to find someone with a passion for old wooden boats to purchase the David B.

"We have 10 years to figure it out," Christine said. "Our goal would be to find someone to give the boat new life."

Until that time, the couple will continue to share their love of boating and life-changing outdoor adventures with passengers new and returning.

"We love experiencing nature," Christine said, "and our philosophy is to be able to inspire others to have similar connections and take their appreciation of nature back home with them to enrich their lives." ■

BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

KENT BOUMA, WECU

Transforming WECU's business services

Whatcom native helped grow commercial banking

Mary Louise Van Dyke

Kent Bouma was ready to tread a new path when he accepted the position of business services manager for Whatcom Educational Credit Union in 2008. He grew up in Whatcom County, was a 1996 University of Washington graduate with an economics degree and had worked as a commercial loan officer with Key Bank in Bellingham for almost 10 years.

At that time, WECU, a nonprofit financial cooperative, was launching commercial banking services with five employees and about $50 million in assets, he said. Bouma's task called for overseeing the development and growth of the credit union's new department.

The biggest challenge, he soon discovered, was overcoming "the perception that credit unions don't do business lending," said Bouma, now the WECU vice president of banking services. Quelling that initial reaction required developing a reputation for getting the job accomplished and putting WECU on the map with the local

business community.

Since 2008, he said, the credit union's business division has expanded from the original five staff to 35 employees, with $500 million in assets in 2023.

WECU was founded in 1936, in the middle of the Great Depression, as Bellingham Teachers Credit Union. A group of teachers met at the former Roeder School on Dupont Street and put their money (the first credit union deposits) into a shoebox, according to the WECU website.

"It's just cool; instead of it being stock-member owned, it's member owned," Bouma said.

Dedicated to local business

In addition to overseeing the growth of WECU's business banking, Bouma said, his job involves overseeing all the businesses loans and deposits and cash management for hundreds of entrepreneurs and established business owners. That division is involved in numerous "impactful projects that benefit a lot of people" in the county, including in Lynden, Ferndale and Bellingham, Bouma said.

Bouma said he spent a month working to help launch WECU's paycheck protection program in early 2020, just as the pandemic struck. Accomplishing this undertaking was a big deal, he said.

"I think we did a very good job, along with a lot of banks (who worked on their own projects) to get it done."

WECU introduced a diversity loan program in 2021 to empower businesses owned by women, minorities and veterans. That program helps provide financing to those who need it the most, in addition to working with already established businesses and housing projects.

"Seeing the vitality the division brings is extremely rewarding," Bouma said, "working with nonprofit organizations to benefit the community in ways that wouldn't be possible without that financing."

> "One of the things I love most about WECU is how giving our employees are."
>
> — Kent Bouma

His biggest joy at work, Bouma said, has been the many internal and external relationships he's formed over the years, such as bringing the right people onto the work team and building friendships in the community.

Lynden's Delft Square (also known as the Waples Mercantile Building) benefited from WECU financing. The historic building sat vacant for several years after an arson fire in 2008, and it required major renovations. "We worked with the owners to revitalize that building and the downtown," Bouma said. The renovated building, which now includes the Inn at Lynden and a mix of restaurants and shops, was rededicated in 2016.

WECU ended 2023 with more than $2.7 billion in assets, a jump from $2.5 billion in 2022, Bouma said.

Community minded

"One of the things I love most about WECU is how giving our employees are," Bouma said. In 2023, WECU donated more than $115,600 to United Way through a workplace campaign and awarded $125,000 through its Education First Grant Program to four local nonprofits, according to the website.

In his leisure time, Bouma is the assistant coach for Lynden Christian High School's varsity football team. He recently joined the board of Whatcom Family YMCA and sometimes volunteers at the monthly community meal held at Assumption Catholic Church in Bellingham. "I usually try to take one of my kids with me," he said. "I've served. I've cooked. I've swept."

WECU has 10 branch locations with more than 400 full-time employees who serve more than 150,000 members. Most employees live in Whatcom County, Bouma said.

Two new branches are actually outside Whatcom County — in Sedro-Woolley and Mount Vernon down in Skagit County. The credit union has a couple of large projects on the front burner, Bouma said, including exploring possible future locations to better serve members and finding ways to improve online and digital banking experiences for commercial customers.

A good choice

"I don't have any regrets," Bouma said. "I enjoy the path I took."

Bouma said he started researching his goal of becoming a banker while attending college. "I interviewed a couple of bankers and saw that was something I would like to do," he said. ■

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

BILLY VANZANTEN, WRS

From laborer to chief operating officer

Billy VanZanten's far-reaching role in the WRS story

Mary Louise Van Dyke

Billy VanZanten started working as a truck driver and laborer for Western Refinery Services in 1982. His initial tasks involved cleaning tanks, installing water lines and cleaning up environmental spills at what then was the Mobil Oil (now Phillips 66) refinery in Ferndale.

At that time, the workforce at WRS included VanZanten, company founder Jerry Libolt and one other employee. He moved up the ladder to work as an equipment operator, and in 1992, he became Libolt's first official partner, according to the company website, segueing into managing the company's operations at the Phillips 66 Ferndale Refinery.

Today, the longtime Ferndale resident is the company's chief operating officer, a role VanZanten hadn't predicted for himself in those early years.

"I never thought I'd be at the top or co-own the company," he said.

The workforce has grown over four decades to more than 250 full-time employees at the main site in Ferndale and at locations in Skagit County and Idaho. About 200 workers are based in Whatcom County, he said. WRS earned $53 million in 2023.

The company's services range from asphalt work to civil construction,

concrete construction, technology and design services, industrial maintenance, land leveling, drone mapping, emergency response, demolition and processing, landscaping and hydro excavation.

The company recently completed the first phase of work to excavate the Swift Creek channel in northern Whatcom County, removing more than 20,000 cubic yards of material from the creek to allow for better water flow.

"We cleaned the channel out, and we're doing a wetland restoration for the creek this spring," VanZanten said.

VanZanten still loves the equipment side of the business and gets out of the office occasionally to visit job sites.

The company's heavy equipment features a wide array of excavators — from a small 10,000-pound machine to an excavator weighing more than 100,000 pounds — used to dig, move material or transport loose gravel, sand or soil. The list also features dump trucks, vacuum trucks, paving equipment and a specialized hydro excavator for soil removal, said VanZanten.

In 2023, company workers used those machines to move over 3 million gallons of water, petroleum products and other substances and complete paving jobs using 59,500 tons of asphalt and 77,200 gallons of sealcoat, among other jobs, according to the WRS Facebook site.

VanZanten meets weekly with his management team to talk about current and upcoming projects, review bids, help facilitate equipment purchases and decide how to handle surplus equipment, among other tasks.

He likes popping in at work sites and viewing what's happening there, speaking with team members and finding out if anything else is needed to make the job a success. Recently, he spent 20 minutes trying out a new excavator being used at a residential job in Bellingham.

"I think the guys appreciate it," he said. "They know I started where they are and that I know about equipment."

Hiring is always taking place at WRS. During new employee orientations, VanZanten and CEO Ryan Likkel highlight the company's priorities. Their philosophy is focused on three C's (character, chemistry and competency), he said, and every year three employees who exemplify those values are honored as award recipients.

The company encourages giving to area foodbanks through food drives. VanZanten serves on several boards, including the Bell Bay Jackson Water Association and the Western States Petroleum Association.

A company goal is to promote employees to new positions or vacancies, VanZanten said. This process allows current employees to use the knowledge, skills and experience they've gained in the field to take on new responsibilities, he said.

VanZanten, who will turn 62 soon, works full time and loves what he does. Even when on vacation, he said, he calls to check in and see how things are going. However, he also foresees a time — eventually — when he will start scaling down his hours and spending more time travelling or engaging in other activities, and his position as COO will need to be filled.

"If Billy's not here," he said, "the company will go on." ■

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

TIERA NIPGES, PACIFIC FACILITY SOLUTIONS

Succesful CEO defies her own expectations

Tiera Nipges is becoming the kind of employer she wants to be

Mary Louise Van Dyke

Tiera Nipges grew up in a construction family that included business owners and entrepreneurs. She expected to own a company one day, but she never expected to achieve her current level of success as CEO and co-owner of Pacific Facility Solutions in Bellingham.

Nipges recalls a college friend predicting she would become a CEO someday. Focused on plans to get a job in information technology after graduation, Nipges chuckled at the idea.

"I don't know if I had the same faith in myself early on," she said.

Achieving her master's degree in project management from George Washington University School of Business in 2012 marked a great personal accomplishment. Nipges was the first person in her extended family to attend college and get a degree. At the same time, she was working full time to pay for college.

"It was probably a combination of a hundred hours a week for years on end," she said.

Pacific Facility Solutions is a family-owned and -operated, full-service facilities maintenance and construction company that specializes in —

but is not limited to — health care facilities. Employees are landscapers, janitors, painters, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, project managers, and asphalt and stormwater maintenance workers. The company has clients from Blaine to Chehalis.

"My parents and I started this business with about $800 combined investment," Nipges said.

The company was formed in 2015, according to the website, and Nipges took over as CEO in September 2019. Early on, she faced a big challenge involving phone callers' perceptions of her role there.

"I'd answer, and the caller would say, 'oh good morning, can I talk to your boss? Can I talk to the guy in charge?'" she said. Her reply: "Well, you know, you're in luck, because that's me."

In 2023, the company's revenues were $8.2 million, with 75 full-time employees. About 60 workers live in Whatcom County, she said, and the company offers health and retirement plans for employees.

"We have become the kind of employer that I want to be, where we're offering a competitive package to our employees," Nipges said. "To me, that's a huge accomplishment, to feel that I'm taking care of my employees to the best of my ability."

Her work background includes about 18 years working in information technology for PeaceHealth and other Bellingham employers. Her prior experience — and her exposure to some "very successful, well-educated business leaders" — helped her learn how large organizations are run, Nipges said.

"Getting to see how high-level business leaders think, how they make decisions, how they vet projects, all the infrastructure that goes into running a large organization, has really made me a good businessperson," she said.

Nipges started out managing projects directly, but her role quickly morphed to focus on building a business structure for growth, she said.

> "Our philosophy is (that) really taking care of our customers and our community and our employees brings success for all of us."
>
> —Tiera Nipges

Achieving a black belt in lean process improvement for health care has helped Nipges examine how company policies and procedures are working and what improvements are needed to improve operations and develop a more positive work culture.

Her current focus is fixed on developing the company's parking lot maintenance and stormwater maintenance divisions. Pacific Facility Solutions employees also are doing more jobs that involve glass installation and glazing work.

Then there's training.

With so many different trades and disciplines within the organization, training varies quite a bit, she said. Electricians, plumbers and heating, ventilation and air conditioning technicians all must be licensed professionals.

Safety on the job site is emphasized; janitorial team members who work in health care settings, for example, are trained in infection prevention, bloodborne pathogens and proper procedures. New hires go through orientation and learn about the company's expectations, technology and service standards.

"In the trades and construction world, there's no end to the amount of training that people have to do," Nipges said.

Receiving compliments from clients feels fantastic, she said, and it fills her cup to share that success directly with the team members responsible.

The company won a safety award in 2022 from Associated General Contractors.

"We have the best safety rating, essentially, we can get through (the Department of) Labor & Industries, and having won that award, I feel it was a big accomplishment," she said.

The company is a supporter of Whatcom Food Bank and Whatcom Hospice.

"Our philosophy is (that) really taking care of our customers and our community and our employees brings success for all of us," she said.

Nipges hopes to stabilize the company's growth and solidify its core competencies.

"We've grown very fast over the past several years," she said. "I want to slow down the growth and make sure that we're maintaining the level of quality and service that we have founded our company on." ■

BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

TY MCCLELLAN, HARDWARE SALES

Strong foundation continues family history

Hardware Sales thrives under McClellan leadership

Mary Louise Van Dyke

Ty McClellan, the owner and president of Hardware Sales Inc. and Hardware Sales Rentals, represents the third generation to run the family-owned business located on James and King streets in Bellingham.

The business has grown exponentially since 1962, when McClellan's grandparents Max and Alta McClellan ran the store with one other staff member. From there, ownership passed to the second generation, which included the McClellans' son and daughter, Jerry McClellan and LaDonna George.

"They built a tremendous foundation to build on," Ty McClellan said.

Alta McClellan was given a lifetime achievement award from Business Pulse in 2003, at age 87, for her work at the store.

Ty McClellan, Alta's grandson, began working at the store after graduating from high school. His initial tasks involved working on lawn mowers, making deliveries and sweeping the floors.

At that time, he said, he wrestled with the idea of splitting away and starting a business of his own. Eventually shelving that idea, Ty McClellan

is still at the store some 34 years later, arriving at 5:30 a.m. and leaving at 5:30 p.m. five days a week.

"I'm obsessed with my own work," McClellan said.

The business specializes in commercial and homeowner hardware, with an industrial sales division and a rentals department. Online and Amazon sales are handled at both a 33,000-square-foot warehouse in Ferndale and a 56,000-square-foot facility in Indiana, he said.

Hardware Sales carries about 80,000 different items.

"Of those different products we try and carry higher-end, contractor-grade products as opposed to inexpensive," he said. "Products … that we can sell with confidence and stand behind."

Hardware Sales employs 140 full-timers, with about 128 residing in Whatcom County, Ty McClellan said. About 55 percent of the $70 million revenues in 2023 came from internet sales, with the remaining amount coming from in-store business. In addition to buying products, customers visit the service center with their lawn mowers, window screens and other items in need of repair.

Today, Ty McClellan oversees the day-to-day operations and is dedicated to ensuring Hardware Sales provides a positive work experience for employees as well as a good shopping experience for customers.

The company's culture is guided by principles from lean manufacturing and "kaizen," a Japanese term for continuous improvement. McClellan describes these processes as eliminating waste, reducing stress and increasing efficiencies.

"Turnover is one of our toughest things," he said. "If you have a bunch of new people, they don't know the depths and breadths of the business. So, if you can retain them, the longer they're here, it reduces stress and creates a better work environment."

> "I'm obsessed with my own work."
> — Ty McClellan

Increasing inventory accuracy is on his front burner right now. That subject is explored at weekly meetings with the team, with people from every single department — office personnel, freight workers, salespeople, etc. — all looking at what happens from the first step of purchasing to pricing to receiving to selling.

Listening to what customers want is a huge part of good service. If the store receives multiple demands for a new product, Hardware Sales will stock that part.

"They really tell us what we need to carry here," McClellan said.

McClellan said the company tries to ensure that salespeople — including those who have experience in the trades, such as plumbing or electrical — always are available to answer questions.

"In leadership, we can put great people in great places, but it's important to make sure that they've got that background knowledge on the products they're selling, know about the codes," he said.

McClellan says the growth of Hardware Sales' customer base is his proudest accomplishment.

"In spring, summer times we'll have up to 2,200 customers through the till," he said, adding the company has always experienced sustained growth since it begun in 1962.

The store faces competition from nearby Home Depot and Lowe's, and battling those stores requires a lot of hard work over many hours to be very organized and ensure a proper place for customers, McClellan said. Parking can be a challenge, so the store is organized to help customers efficiently locate and purchase needed items.

The store's community outreach focuses primarily on youth-based endeavors, such as Toys for Tots, sending kids from low-income families to summer camp and helping scouting organizations.

"We try to go as direct as possible to help the less fortunate," he said.

McClellan says many businesses don't continue long enough to make it to the third generation of family ownership. Hardware Sales staff now includes the fourth generation: McClellan's daughter, Brookelyn McClellan, handles the marketing and social media presence.

McClellan said he looks forward to continuing to work with staff at keeping Hardware Sales a great place to be and a great place to work. ■

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

KAREN DYKSTRA, WRS

Character, Chemistry, Competency

Simple credo is Dykstra's 'secret sauce' for success

Tamara Anderson-Loucks

Character. Chemistry. Competency. These are the "three C's" — core values of WRS and characteristics the company looks for in every team member. To encourage employees to remain focused on and work toward continued growth in these areas, two years ago WRS established the 3Cs Awards, in which every team member can nominate one co-worker in each of the three categories. WRS People and Benefits Manager Karen Dykstra has been nominated multiple times over the last two years. It's because of her natural embodiment of character, chemistry and competency that Dykstra was nominated for and chosen as the winner of this year's Jon Strong Employee of the Year award.

"Karen is the ideal example of our three C's. She's a special person," said Lyss Kuik, WRS marketing and communications manager. "Our people feel comfortable going to her with any questions or problems, and they know she'll be happy to help them."

Located in Ferndale, WRS offers specialized contracting services, including civil construction, asphalt and concrete work, industrial maintenance

and refinery services. The company currently employs about 250 people.

Dykstra joined WRS six and a half years ago as a timekeeper — tracking, submitting and reconciling employee hours and processing related billing for a specific division of the company. In 2019, she was promoted to payroll administrator, a role in which she managed all aspects of payroll processing and prevailing wage reporting and helped enroll team members in the company's various insurance offerings.

The receipt of an accurate paycheck is of utmost importance to employees everywhere, but thanks to Dykstra's dedication to accuracy and a job well done, payroll errors at WRS are an extremely rare occurrence.

Tom Carroll, asphalt operations manager, has worked with Dykstra since she first joined the WRS team.

"Karen takes her job very seriously," Carroll said. "In our line of work, payroll is very confusing, because there are so many differing rates for the various crafts. She takes it personally to ensure every employee is paid correctly. Though her job is challenging, she is always pleasant, always positive, and always sees the best in everybody."

For Dykstra, dedication to a job well done, in both work and her personal life, brings her great satisfaction.

"I want to serve people," she said. "I want to be the best I can be, and I enjoy knowing that at the end of the day, I've completed something, and it was done correctly."

Leadership is where Dykstra really shines. She strives to help others succeed, teaches with patience, sets an example of how to interact with people on both a personal and professional level, and creates a supportive work environment for those around her. However, Kuik is most inspired by Dykstra's listening skills.

"Active listening is a gift and an often-overlooked leadership quality," Kuik said. "It's easy to get so invested in your own projects and deadlines that you forget to slow down and truly listen to people. Karen inspires me to stop, listen, and then work on a situation or problem. I really respect that about her."

In recognition of her contributions, Dykstra recently received a promotion to people and benefits manager, a human-resource-focused role in which she'll manage employee benefits and the hiring process, among other duties. It's a position her co-workers say is an excellent fit.

"Karen performs her duties with heart and doesn't act like helping a co-worker is an inconvenience," said Amy Wheeler, maintenance and construction administrator, who has worked with Dykstra for six years. "She finds joy in helping others and has incredible integrity. She takes the time to get to know you and supports her co-workers professionally and personally. She's just an awesome person, and the award is so well deserved."

It's apparent that Dykstra is highly respected and well loved by her co-workers. The admiration goes both ways. To Dykstra, WRS is an exceptional place to work.

"From the CEO down, I get to work with incredible people who truly love their work and support and lift everybody up," she said. "The culture we have here is one of the strengths of this company. The three C's are part of the hiring process to ensure who we hire is a good fit. It makes for a very cohesive work environment."

When asked what employees can do to stand out in the workplace, Dykstra said she believes it's important to come to work prepared to focus on the day, do your job to the best of your ability, ask for help when needed, be open to feedback, and own your mistakes. Though she follows this advice herself, she also believes in honoring a basic credo.

"Treat others how you would like to be treated," she said. "Follow that in life, and you're going to go far." ■

The Jon Strong Employee of the Year award is given to a full-time employee of a Whatcom County business who shows consistent integrity, commitment, professionalism and teamwork. The award is named after longtime Whatcom Business Alliance employee Jon Strong (1947-2019).

PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

PHOTO: Sattva Photo

STEVEN SUNDIN, CITY OF BELLINGHAM

Having as much fun as a city planner can

Steve Sundin is a kind, diplomatic face at City Hall

Heather Lea

Some days, Steve Sundin walks into work with the question many of us have: *"What in the world is going to happen today?"*

But then he shifts his perspective to this: *Anything will happen.*

And anything can happen when you're a city planner. He may not always get a "yes" for a development project or a unanimous vote to protect fresh waterbodies, but the great part about what Sundin does for a living is help create a city he wants to live in.

"I'm lucky to have the job I do," he said. "An environmental planner is up to date on the best available science and current environmental programs and ensures that these sources of information are reflected in our land use planning and specific project reviews."

Sundin moved to Bellingham from Seattle in 1991. After graduating from Western Washington University in 1996 with a degree in regional and

urban planning, he was hired as a city of Bellingham intern. Two years later, he became a permanent employee and has been in the Planning and Community Development Department since. In 2017, Sundin was promoted from city planner to senior city planner.

That's 28 years and counting in a career he came upon almost by accident. Before WWU, Sundin attended Whatcom Community College, where he was given a graduating project to study something of his choosing and submit a paper capturing what he'd discovered.

"Have some fun, keep a positive attitude, hum a song. I like to have as much fun as a city planner can."

—Steve Sundin

"I can't remember exactly how I decided to go to a 'citizen visioning' workshop that was happening as part of the city's comprehensive planning process in 1994," he said. "I found (the workshop) intriguing, and by the end of the quarter the paper basically wrote itself."

An environmental planner is responsible for a variety of activities, including environmental regulations to protect natural features such as wetlands, streams, floodplains, marine, steep slopes and trees.

Planners can also be part of larger city teams as a subject matter expert, Sundin said, and should be able to convey the complexities of environmental science and regulations to the public, advisory boards, commissions and elected officials.

Being a city planner is more about a career in diplomacy than anything else, he said.

"I'm comfortable in that environment," Sundin said. "But being in the middle of perspectives and sometimes competing interests from both outward and internal forces can result in a little wear and tear."

So how does he handle that?

"Have some fun, keep a positive attitude, hum a song," he said. "I like to have as much fun as a city planner can."

Sounds easy, but there's more to it than that — like being fair, concise and able to convey complex information to any audience, for example.

"'Getting to yes' is a worthwhile mantra, but being able to clearly convey 'no' and why is vital," he said.

Sundin is the recipient of the Public Service Award from Business Pulse.

"I consider it an honor, and I'm humbled that time was taken to identify and discuss me as a candidate," he said. "I love my job and what I do and what my responsibilities are. Because of this, I don't necessarily need accolades in this type of setting. I believe that there are others I work with at the city who would be equally deserving of recognition."

He is also thankful for his leadership team in the department; they have been supportive of his work and, more importantly, how he goes about that work from day to day.

"This extends to my compadres across the city whom I enjoy working with and lending a hand to for their own professional efforts," he said.

When he's not working, you may find Steve backpacking, bicycling, playing the piano or out on the golf course. He loves spending time with family.

"(I'm) married to my best friend and (am) a parent to two awesome, now mostly grown-up, kids who are each walking their own path in school and career," he said. "We all love our time together playing cards, spinning records and cooking up some fantastic meals during all of which we laugh, tease and converse." ■

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

JOHN FERLIN & MIMI BROOKS FERLIN, BROOKS MANUFACTURING

Legacy!

A story of a powerful and respected business duo

Tara Gilligan Reimer

The critical step to engineering the all-important crossarm for the common electrical utility pole is to make sure the joining — the crossarm to the pole — is permanently tight and secure. Crossing this "T" is high-stakes work. Entire towns, communities and industries depend on this crucial connection — and, in fact, thousands of these connections — for constant flows of energy to fuel schools, workplaces and regional infrastructures.

Brooks Manufacturing Co. in Bellingham produces these industry-certified and acclaimed crossarms. Crews utilize responsibly sourced, straight-grained coastal Douglas fir with tested steel fittings. Hard-hat pros know how to make each crossarm permanently tight and secure. The company also manufactures a full complement of structural framing material for high-voltage transmission lines for the electric utilities industry.

True permanence and right fit are what Mary "Mimi" Brooks Ferlin and her husband, John Ferlin, embody not only in their third-generation ownership of Brooks Manufacturing Co. but also in their commitment to the well-being of Whatcom County citizens. For their work to engineer strong and enduring structures in their business, work crews, family and the larger community, this articulate, business-savvy and philanthropic couple has been selected for the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award from Business Pulse.

The history

The success of Brooks Manufacturing Co. can be attributed to key people having the curiosity and courage to continually adapt to new technology. Shrewd economist Mimi and trained-attorney-turned-businessman John openly laud their professionals

and crew — including a sawmill operator in an advisory role at the right time, financial investors and their board of directors — for Brooks' staying power and stellar industry reputation.

The story of Brooks started in the early 1920s when Mimi's grandparents, Frank Noyes Brooks and Francis Carver Brooks, having moved to Bellingham in 1919, established a sawmill in Glacier. The current site of Bellingham's Brooks Manufacturing was acquired in 1938 by Mimi's grandparents from the estate of Ralph Turner. Turner had operated a wood stave pipe and tank manufacturer on the site since 1915.

"Wood stave pipes and tanks were the predecessors to concrete, fiberglass or steel pipes and tanks," John Ferlin said.

A stave is a narrow length of wood with a slightly beveled edge that, when assembled with other staves, makes a circle to form a pipe or tank. Staves, handmade by coopers to construct pipes and tanks, were used from the 1870s to the 1920s for water supply, irrigation and sewer systems.

Located on Pacific Street in Bellingham, adjacent to auto row on Iowa Street in Roosevelt's light industrial neighborhood, the company's iconic melamine-green buildings, emblazoned with the company's name in 6-foot-high, black-and-white block letters, bear its history.

"Same site as 90 years ago," marveled Mimi.

The arc of the business

After acquiring Ralph Turner's operation, the Brooks family continued to operate the Glacier sawmill as well as the Bellingham pipe and tank operation. Upon the death of Mimi Ferlin's grandfather in 1939, the sawmill was closed. In 1944, a huge fire burned down the entire wood stave operation. The Brooks family made a significant decision. Rather than give up and sell, they decided to rebuild the plant and ordered new machinery to add wood crossarms as another product line. World War II was winding down, and demand for electric infrastructure was gearing up.

Mimi's grandparents, Frank Noyes Brooks and Francis Carver Brooks.

Crossarm production began in 1946. All products were shipped by rail, with the company located on a rail spur.

Trained as an attorney, with a law degree from Hastings College (now the University of California Law School, San Francisco), John Ferlin came onboard in 1987 to manage Brooks Lumber.

At the same time, Mimi acquired ownership interest. After her father passed away in 1995, Mimi and John bought the rest of the ownership from Mimi's mother.

Mimi had earned a degree in economics, studying at both the University of Washington and Western Washington University.

"At the time," she said, "I was the only female in my class."

But her singularity didn't faze her.

"My grandmother graduated from Vassar and my grandfather from West Point," she said. Business was regular conversation at the dinner table: "I grew up talking with my parents about wood products, strikes, forest fires and business markets."

After college graduation, she was hired as a security analyst assistant at Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco, where she met the love of her life, John Ferlin. They moved to San Diego, where John practiced law and Mimi got a job as a portfolio manager with a bank in San Diego.

"I was privileged to learn and know how the market worked," she said.

With Mimi Brooks Ferlin as the majority shareholder, Brooks Manufacturing was rightfully designated as a woman-owned business.

"We qualified for contracts," John Ferlin said. "For 15 years, we were able to build more business against tough competitors."

The married couple, with three children, emerged as a powerful and respected business duo. In separate interviews, their regard — and affection — for each other was palpable. Mimi was quick to credit her husband: "I inherited the business, but John built it." John said, laughing, "If I hadn't run the business successfully, I knew Mimi would have to get rid of me! I didn't want to put her in that position. And I didn't want to be in that position!"

The knowledge of successful business owners

Reflecting on his tenure as president and CEO through 2006, John Ferlin easily ticked off the components of running a business.

"People are the key component," he said. "We have been so fortunate to have the right people."

His wife agreed.

"The team is everything," Mimi Brooks Ferlin said. Both cited the current president and CEO, Shannon Terrell, as "exceptional."

John Ferlin expanded: "You need the right policies and procedures in place. You need to know that quality comes from the top down."

He pointed out, "We were always sufficiently capitalized."

And he explained how he and his team managed variables out of their control, from fickle interest rates that affected equipment upgrades to changing environmental laws.

"At one time," he said, "our annual stormwater permit cost $200. Then, the permit rose to $28,000 per year."

He summed up: "We couldn't control all the variables. But we tried to be the best we could be."

The payoff and the community investment

With Mimi Brooks Ferlin's support and signoff, her husband kept upgrading equipment, decreasing costs, acquiring raw material and expanding production capabilities.

"We wanted to be the last one standing," he said. "We put ourselves in the position to capture market share."

That was critical in a shrinking market, Mimi Brooks Ferlin said.

"It took a lot of guts to invest millions in Brooks Manufacturing when everyone was cutting back," she said. "But we had a vision and a strategy: 'I'm going to be the last one standing.'"

Across decades, Brooks Manufacturing Co. prepared well for changes, investing in equipment and people. And then, they were the last crossarm producer left.

"There's always a story in every business success," John said.

"I believed in John," Mimi said, "and I believed in us."

As if building one business wasn't enough, Mimi Brooks Ferlin also cultivated another company.

"I get bored easily," she said.

In the 1990s, she put together apartment and condominium rentals and built storage units (on Brooks Manufacturing Co. property), calling her second business Brooks Property. The company currently has 150 units, residential and storage combined

"It's all about the team," Mimi Brooks Ferlin said. "I have a great group running this business, too."

With a family history rooted in civic engagement, Mimi has made sure the hard-won success of Brooks has gone well beyond the boundaries of their headquarters, offices and yard of 90 years.

"My father was part of a group of businessmen who sought out industry, to create jobs for our community," she said.

Frank Carver Brooks, along with other business leaders, helped bring Intalco and Arco to the area.

"He and my mother, Nancy Gray Brooks, knew how important good, living-wage jobs were to individuals and the community."

Both John and Mimi have continued the Brooks family's fierce civic engagement.

Mimi helped start the hospital foundation, part of the group that funded the new emergency department and cancer department. She served on the hospice foundation, helping to install end-of-life care in our community.

John served on various civic organization boards, leading as the president of the Mount Baker Area Boy Scouts Council. He was a founding member and chairman of the board of Bank Northwest, established in Bellingham and later acquired by Bank of the Pacific.

The Ferlins gave a significant $1.5 million gift to Lighthouse Mission Ministries to help with the construction of the rising structure on F Street. Because of their founding and ongoing investments, a middle school house (similar to the houses in Harry Potter) is named for their family at Franklin Academy.

Mimi and John also have generously given to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Whatcom County and Bellingham Technical College.

"It's important to invest back in your community," John Ferlin said, "not just buy a big house for yourself. It's incumbent upon us to contribute back and provide, not handouts, but programs to help others find a way."

It was a gift to be able to serve, Mimi Brooks Ferlin said.

"What I learned from the Brooks family, my parents and grandparents, is that it is a privilege to help others," she said. "You are lucky if you can leave your place in the world better than how you found it."

And that's exactly what Mimi and John have done. An economist married an attorney-turned-businessman, and their business acumen and passion have made Whatcom County a better place to live and work. ■