

Darcy Ruef

AS A DELUGE of rain poured down outside the Woodburn store of Al's Garden & Home, Darcy Ruef looked out the window and shook her head.

"People can't really garden when they're drowning," she said with a sigh. "It's been an interesting spring — one of the worst on record."

As the company's chief financial officer, Ruef's job is to make sure the family-owned-and-operated business maintains its bottom line — come rain or come shine.

She's done just that by helping oversee an expanded retail product line that includes clothing, indoor décor, patio furniture and accents — hence the recent addition of "& Home" to the company's name. Al's also maintains its margins by growing the majority of plants they sell.

Ruef (née Bigej) is the oldest of four children who grew up under Jack Bigej, the OAN Hall of Famer who grew Al's from a fruit stand into four large retail stores with locations in Gresham, Sherwood, Woodburn and a new one in Wilsonville that opened this spring.

Like her "little" brother Mark Bigej, who currently serves as OAN's member president in addition to his duties as chief operations officer for Al's, Ruef has taken on an active role within the organization. She serves as chair of the Oregon Nurseries Foundation, which awards education scholarships to students pursuing careers in the horticulture industry.

"It's heartening to see people wanting to come into



WORK Chief Financial Officer, Al's Garden & Home
OAN Chair, Oregon Nurseries Foundation;
Past-chair, OAN Retail Chapter
CONTACT 503-981-1245 / druef@als-gardencenter.com

this industry, and how the OAN is helping them out," she said.

Ruef also voiced optimism about the upcoming gardening season, despite this spring's record-setting rainfall.

"It's not that the economy is bad or that people don't want to garden, you just really can't garden in this weather," she said. "It'll come back as soon as the weather comes around. It's just a game of hanging on until it does."

How has the slow start to this year affected operations? We've delayed staffing up, but probably as of this week (April 26) we're at full staff and ready for spring. We'll delay it a little until the weather gets better, but at the same time we need to train staff, so we're bringing them on now.

When did you take on your current role in the family business? My degree is in finance, from Oregon State University. I lived in Los Angeles for three and a half years after college, and worked for the management group that managed the Biltmore Hotel and a few international projects. I moved home in 1993 and took over the finances a year later.

How has growing up in the family business impacted you? It's taught all us kids a lot. We all worked together when we were younger, so it taught us how to work together now that we're older — and enjoy it! It gave us a work ethic and how to earn our own money. Building greenhouses wasn't so fun, but it kept our family together, allowed us to set our own schedules, and

MEET THE LEADER

Interview and photo by Peter Szymczak

gave us time together. It also paid for our education. The end goal was college.

Now you're helping others attend college through the Oregon Nurseries Foundation.

ONF is a great group of people. We received a great batch of applications this year from young people interested in the green industry. We want to support our chapters and help families continue family-owned nursery businesses. I'm looking forward to awarding the scholarships and announcing them in August.

What are some challenges young people face in getting a start in this industry? As a parent with children in college, I find it amazing how many options there are. Education is a very competitive marketplace, so the choices are very hard to make. When I was growing up, our choices were all close to home — Oregon, Oregon State, University of Portland, Linfield. Now it's California, Texas, Utah, wherever.

Is there any pressure for your kids to join the family business? Not at all. There wasn't when we were growing up either. The assumption was we wouldn't, and we're going on the same assumption. They need to find their own way, and their own way back. This is a hard grind, so if they can go out and do something better and support us in our old age, all the better.

What's the biggest challenge you see facing the industry today? Legislation.

Meet the Leader: Darcy Ruef

Mandatory predictive scheduling is dangerous for our industry. There's a misunderstanding that scheduling is easy — we can't predict what the weather is going to do! We bring on seasonal people when we're busy, and not when we're not.

Has finding workers been challenging this season? Yes, especially with the minimum wage going up. The government forced us to raise our wages, and employment is at an extremely low level, so it's been hard to find seasonal people.

How else has the minimum wage increase affected your

business? Our Sherwood store is on the boundary of being in the top tier of minimum wages. But the problem is, we have to raise wages business-wide. We can't pay one position one thing in one area and different in another. We've also learned that people will travel for a higher wage, so you can't have different wages in different areas. The same is true for our greenhouses.

What was the thought process behind the company's new name? When we opened the new Wilsonville store, we changed our name from Al's Garden Center to Al's Garden & Home. "Garden Center"

is an older image, and we're trying to offer products for both inside and outside the home. As we thought about what we were going to stock in Wilsonville, and the fact that it's more like our Sherwood store, we started thinking about what we really were. We started that exercise last fall. We thought about who we were and what we wanted to be, and how we were going to get there.

How have Al's retail offerings changed over the past 20 years? We're always looking to make ourselves a little less seasonal. We've added bulk products — compost and planting mix. Home décor,

both inside and outside — mirrors and lamps have been really strong lately. With plants, we're always looking for new and different. We've added a pet area and patio furniture.

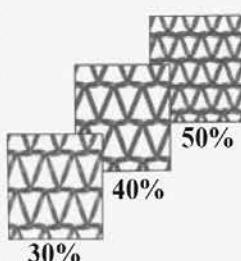
We've added clothing to the mix — we were one of the first to get into it. We did it in 2009 because people were no longer buying home décor, but they were buying small personal items, such as jewelry.

We're also bringing in containers of pottery and patio furniture. New homes have small lots where there's not much to landscape. As homes get smaller, we're trying to do the whole home, but plants will always be our core. ☺

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