

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Kindness Counts

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In a time when our society is so divided, so polarized, and people are just plain mean to each other, Stephanie Berkhout is a breath of fresh air.

She lives by many mantras, but the overall theme in every aspect of her life is kindness.

She tackles every challenge head on with enthusiasm and a can-do attitude. She's genuine and open with her willingness to not only share her knowledge, but to also ask others to impart theirs. (And all while taking copious notes.)

Even during extremely trying personal times, Stephanie has found ways to stay optimistic and focused. She's not stressing about the little things out of her control, instead looking ahead at the big picture.

It's for all of these reasons that Stephanie has earned the attention and respect of her co-workers and peers ... and with less than three years in our industry under her belt.

Riana Neels, Stephanie's co-worker and the person who nominated her for the award, said, "Stephanie leads by example. Her engaging, positive attitude is infectious; she inspires her team and others in the company. She breathes positivity—always looking for the benefits in any situation, problem or conversation.

"Stephanie is a giver—we are all better from being on her team."



From farm to flowers

Stephanie's roots are so deep in Chilliwack, British Columbia, that she never left. She was born, raised and educated, and now lives and works in the same place she's always called home.

As with states like California, Michigan and Florida, British Columbia is known in Canada for its many agriculture and horticulture operations. Stephanie's father worked in BC agriculture his entire career, including selling feed, so when she was young she would tag along with him to the farms when he visited

his customers, sometimes helping to milk the cows if they needed a hand.

Traveling around with her father gave her the itch to start working at a young age, so she got a job at a neighborhood grocery store, which sold many local goods from BC, when she was just 13 years old. She worked there throughout high school and into her 20s, when she decided it was time for a change.

Stephanie saw the career fulfillment her father got from visiting dairy and livestock farms, so she got a job working at a local dairy farm, milking and tending to the cows. She enjoyed it so much that she enrolled at the University of Fraser Valley (UFV) to study agriculture.

But not willing to settle for just one thing, Stephanie wanted more, so she transitioned to the horticulture program at UFV. A few months later, a fellow classmate was working at Qualitree Propagators and called her to see if she'd be interested in coming to work there. The prospect made Stephanie nervous—cows she knew. Ornamental crops? Not as much ...

"I'd only had the basic, foundational learning experience from university," she said, which made her question herself. "What if I'm not good enough? What if I just don't know enough?"

She already knew about Qualitree because she visited the facilities with one of her horticulture classes, so she also knew that was where "all of the A players go." She was intimidated, but excited to take on a new challenge.

"I kind of stewed on the idea for two weeks and let them know that I was taking the decision very seriously, so I wanted to think on it. I came and shadowed for a couple of days," she said, and then adds with a laugh, "I'm so glad that I eventually said yes!"



Stephanie started as an assistant grower, given a small growing section to maintain. And as she learned more, she earned more and more responsibilities.

"It was a lot of learning from the ground up," she admitted. "A lot of amazing people at Qualitree really helped with instruction and collaboration. I went from a small space in a growing area to now I pretty much know every growing area. It's been something that's evolved."

Management Leadership skills

That was two and a half years ago and since then, Stephanie has entrenched herself into the Qualitree

management staff and the culture. She's now a Lead Grower, managing about 10 people—but Stephanie would prefer not to use the term “managing people.”

“It just seems like a very stale statement,” she said. “I’ve heard the saying that managers play checkers and leaders play chess, so being able to offer leadership or mentorship is something really appealing to me. But I’m still learning so much myself; it’s definitely a very humble place to be.”

In her nomination form, Riana told the story of a young worker named Dionicio. She said that when he arrived at Qualitree through Canada’s Seasonal Agriculture Worker program with no experience, Stephanie took him under her wing and trained him to be a Grower Assistant. By the end of his work term, Dionicio was responsible for his own section. Since then, he’s returned to Qualitree and is being trained as a Section Grower.

“Stephanie believes in developing people and acts on this—Dionicio is living proof,” said Riana.

For Stephanie, helping her colleagues and developing a training program comes naturally to her.

“Even when I was working in dairy, I facilitated the training for every new person,” she explained. “I just think it comes to working with people—when you’re excited about something, they’re excited about it. And working where I do and getting to do what I do, it’s very easy to be excited. For the most part, everybody that we take under our wing at Qualitree feels the same way.”

But she had to work a bit to become the outgoing, enthusiastic young woman you see in her Young Grower Finalist video (go to the GrowerTalks YouTube channel to see it), which is surprising when you talk to her. But when she started her first job at the grocery store, Stephanie said she was so shy that her face would turn bright red when someone spoke to her. But it turned out starting out in the real world at such a young age helped break her out of her shell.

“I’m actually an introvert in disguise,” she said. “My very first boss really instilled this work ethic in me and wanting to interact with people, so I really credit a lot of that to my first job. I think that was a real turning point for me.”

Her past jobs and experiences—and, of course, the current one at Qualitree—has helped mold her leadership style, taking what she’s learned from co-workers along the way (the good and the bad).

“I get a little bit of something from everyone, whether it’s a boss or a manager or the leaders in my life or my colleagues,” she explained. “I learn so much from them, not just professionally, but personally as well.”

And all of this has built up her character—what Stephanie believes is the foundation of a good leader.

“Who you are is everything,” she stated. “You have to learn to say, ‘I need help’ or ‘I don’t know.’ And when you approach that with kindness and vulnerability, people are more receptive to that than an ego.”

Finding strength in adversity

When we chose the three finalists for this year’s Young Grower Award, COVID-19 was just showing up on our radars. And when we asked them to write their essays for the June issue, many states had already implemented shelter-in-place orders. It was a tumultuous time and it remains so, as cases and deaths continue to increase, especially in certain parts of the U.S.

Admittedly, Canada appears to be faring through the coronavirus pandemic a bit better than the States, but businesses and households in the provinces are still undergoing safety protocols and changes to their processes to help stave off the spread of the virus. This includes Qualitree, of course.

“We really had to analyze our different processes and adapt those to make them simpler,” said Stephanie. “Maybe have the same amount of people in the same line or less people in the line for different things. As far as the work

processes have gone, we've really had to work lean, and identify what's really necessary and what's not.

"So we had to change how we do everything—not just how we were working, but how we were interacting with each other."

This proved difficult since the culture at Qualitree allows for everyone to be very close-knit, participating in office potlucks and get-togethers after work. COVID-19 has temporarily changed that dynamic, but it offered a chance to learn new lessons and appreciate what our industry offers.

"What I recognized through this whole COVID ordeal is that I'm helping make something that's bringing other people so much joy," said Stephanie. "We see it here in Chilliwack and on Facebook and in places all over the world. People are going to the garden centers, even just to walk around as something to do that brings them some joy. Seeing people take pride in their gardens. I really feel like I am part of something greater, and I think that many people already knew that, but COVID amplified that this is why we do what we do."

Stephanie's show of strength and positivity comes from a familiar place of adversity—this past winter, her husband Mark went through treatment for cancer for the second time. In the short time they've been together as a young couple, they've been through the toughest of times that most people never see in a lifetime. Thankfully, Mark finished his chemotherapy treatments in January. But right when he got the go-ahead from the doctors to go back to work, COVID happened, so the Berkhouets found themselves back on life's roller coaster.

"It was a very trying time for us," she said. "Wanting to return to normal and then experiencing this twist where it wasn't going to be normal for anybody. I hate the term 'the new normal' because everyone says it; but, you know, we've adapted.

"I feel like things have slowed down in my personal life in very humble ways, where our perspective has completely changed. This is the second time around that we had dealt with this, but it gives you so much perspective and things to be grateful for that when COVID did happen, it was like, 'Okay, we're going to roll with the punches and do the best we can together.'"

Stephanie said that she and Mark couldn't have gotten through those months without the help and support from their family, and her friends and colleagues at Qualitree.

"I have a lot of loyalty and heart at Qualitree because of the response and the amount of care that I got when [Mark and I] got the news," she said. "The head grower Gary and Riana took me to lunch the next day and asked, 'What's the plan? How do we make this work for you?' It wasn't just about Qualitree—it was, 'What about you? How can we help you?' I couldn't speak higher about Qualitree."

Sweet dreams

Despite some personal hurdles and a job that can turn on a dime (or, rather, on a bad storm or pest issue), Stephanie continues to maintain a positive and well-adjusted attitude—to the point where she says she has no problems sleeping at night. She goes through the typical problems that every grower worries about, but they're not big enough to keep her up—as long as she remembers where she put her notes.

"I'm the kind of person that takes notes ... and takes notes ... and takes notes," she said. "So I write my list, I write down my notes and it really helps me with my learning process. You know exactly what you need to tackle and you follow through. I think, for the most part, if you're writing down all the details and you're holding yourself accountable, you'll sleep at night."



Part of the Qualitree team: (From left) Stefanie Thoma, Riana Neels, Stephanie Berkhout and Olivia Ter Haar.

Another reason why Stephanie has restful nights is because Mark is doing well and back to work as a hydro-demolitionist (a fancy term for someone who breaks up concrete using high-pressure water, like on bridges and remediation projects). They're going on 10 years together, six as husband and wife, and they're just enjoying their time together in their new home with their two dogs.

Just like at work, Stephanie has her hands in many things when she's at home. Whether it's in the kitchen cooking, at her easel and canvas painting landscapes, dabbling in photography and videography, visiting family and friends, or listening to music, she keeps busy. And always keeps another one of her mantras in mind.

"Happiness will not come to those who fail to appreciate what they already have. That's another saying that really sticks with me," she said. "Just be a good person and appreciate what you have and everything will be okay."

It's a simple, but significant, way of looking at things ... especially nowadays. **GT**