

THE NURSERY NEXT DOOR: LEIF KNECHT '73 STAYS

# CLOSE to HIS ROOTS

BY CARL SCHROEDER '05 PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAN HUMMEL

**T**HE APPLE DOESN'T FALL far from the tree, it is said. For Leif Knecht '73, a longtime passion for greenery led to the establishment of a successful tree nursery and landscaping business based on St. Olaf-owned property across the highway from where he spent much of his youth. Now in its ninth year of retail operation, Knecht's Nurseries and Landscaping, run by Leif and his wife, Deb, offers more than 1,200 varieties of trees, shrubs and other plants, serving customers from as far away as Lake Vermillion to as close as the college next door.

"My ties to St. Olaf go back to my earliest memories," says Knecht, the son of Loring Knecht '47 and Suzanne Toan Knecht, who both taught French at the college. He lived on campus in a former Army barracks near Old Main and speaks fondly of a later home on nearby Orchard Street, where the family spent "many happy hours planting and tending a backyard garden."

As a student at St. Olaf, Knecht designed an independent study program through the Paracollege (forerunner of the current Center for Integrative Studies), where his area of concentration was the theology of nature. Today, he credits the Paracollege with "fostering a very inquisitive, free-roaming way of looking at the world that has benefited me a great deal in these later years."

"LEIF HAS BEEN A MAJOR FACTOR IN THE REFORESTING OF ST. OLAF, AND THAT'S A LIVING LEGACY THAT WILL LAST FOREVER."

— PROFESSOR GENE BAKKO, CURATOR OF THE ST. OLAF NATURAL LANDS

Knecht's interest in the outdoors led him after college to guide canoe trips for an American Lutheran Church camp and a Minnesota corrections program called Expeditions of North America. During the summer of 1978 he helped lead youth on a 72-day, 1,400-mile canoe expedition from the Minnesota-Ontario border to Northwest Saskatchewan. "Being in close contact with nature has always nurtured my soul," he explains.

As the 1970s came to a close, Knecht began full-time work at a commercial painting firm in Northfield he had founded while a student at St. Olaf. Beneath the

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"From my earliest memory, I've been living in the shadow of the Hill and now I find myself working in that shadow," says Leif Knecht '73, co-owner of Knecht's Nurseries and Landscaping.



surface of this steady career, though, another ambition started to germinate. In 1986, along with his friend Richard Schedtler, the assistant pastor of his church in Northfield, Knecht bought a piece of land along the Cannon River and began planting trees. "That rekindled my love of working with plants," he says, "and it wasn't too long after that I realized I could have a new career."

While continuing to operate his painting business, Knecht began acquiring more land, including a plot he leased from the college adjacent to Highway 19. Slowly a tree nursery and landscaping business began to take shape. He credits his wife, Deb, whom he married in 1992, with financially supporting their family while he plowed most of his earnings back into the fledgling enterprise. "I owe everything to her partnership with me, every step of the way," he says.

Rather than going into debt by hiring a large staff and buying heavy machinery, Knecht nurtured the tree business by hand, collecting native seed sources from fields. Deb pitched in on weekends, helping plant seedlings in a pioneering fashion. "In the early days, Leif and I would literally plant trees using a wheelbarrow and some shovels," she recalls. "We had to walk before we could run."

By 1998, both Knechts were working full time at the nursery. They added a retail plant center in 1999, and in 2000 the City of Northfield gave the business a Clem Shearer Grant (awarded to local startup businesses for economic development) to

finance additional greenhouse construction and the expansion of a seasonal workforce. Today Knecht's Nurseries and Landscaping (*knechts.net*), open from late February to late November, is a sprawling complex of 10 greenhouses and 45 acres of field-tree production, with a multigenerational staff of up to 25 part- and full-time employees.

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The main retail facility and part of the tree production is on land leased from St. Olaf, and the nursery staff includes several St. Olaf students who view their jobs as a natural extension of their studies.

"Working with plants, garden maintenance and development is a great hands-on experiential learning opportunity," says biology major Maggie Roddick '06.

A big part of Knecht's community outreach has been his longstanding commitment to St. Olaf. In collaboration with Biology Professor and Curator of Natural Lands Gene Bakko, Knecht has helped create what Bakko calls an "instant forest" through the donation and sale of hundreds of nursery-grown trees spread across 100-plus acres on campus. "Leif has been a major factor in getting this reforestation going," says Bakko, "and that's a living legacy that will last forever."

Knecht has beautified the broader Northfield community with landscaping projects at the recently dedicated Northfield

Area Veterans Memorial, the Maple Hills affordable housing development and Northfield Hospital. He has served on the Bridgewater Township Board of Supervisors for eight years, writes a weekly column on plants and the environment for the *Northfield News* and often discusses issues such as transportation and clean

water with State Representative Ray Cox, a fellow 1973 St. Olaf graduate serving his second term in the Minnesota House.

"Leif has always been a very dedicated and serious individual for any cause that he undertakes," says Cox, who owns Northfield Construction. "His concerns are genuine and well thought out. The Northfield community is lucky to have him running a quality nursery business."

As Knecht prepares to plant a "second generation" of acorns collected from some of the first oak trees produced at his nursery, he is mindful of the rewards of running a business in which Mother Nature compounds benefits annually. "We know that with a modest amount of care, these plantings are designed to prosper, to grow more beautiful with each passing year," he says. "You get paid back more than you ever give." ■

**Carl Schroeder '05** is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer and composer.

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