

Worker Portraits **Faces of Strength**

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It's a good life

by Megan Douglass

Randi Pappa laughs about being in a job where she "counts paperclips" and keeps things in a very orderly fashion, working as a bookkeeper. She finds that her job description and her personality couldn't be more opposite.



Somewhere between 9 and 9:30 a.m. most days, a delicately built red-headed woman with the perfect posture of an equestrian strolls across the wooden front porch of the small gray house that serves as the office for the Peoples Building Co. in Hubbard. Accompanying her is her dog, Quincy. As bookkeeper for Jack and Marty Wohlgamuth, brothers and co-owners of Peoples Building, Randi Pappa has worked here for the past eight years.

"I have a real aversion to time and schedules and demands that I be somewhere at a certain time. I'll hear Marty say on the phone to people 'Well, why don't you come in anywhere between 9 and 9:30. Our office girl will be here then.'" She laughs about the way her bosses joke around about her laid-back attitude toward schedules. She explains that she can get away with showing up whenever she does because, "They know I have a lot of responsibility. They always had two or three people doing it before I came."

Peoples Building is a company that builds horse barns from Illinois to the Carolinas. Their projects range from "the real ordinary, ramshackle little barns for someone who doesn't have much money," to the "extravagantly ridiculous showcases for people who are pathetically wealthy." They also own Frito-Lay warehouses and other storage houses which are already built and are simply rented out. Randi takes care of all the behind-the-scenes business.

Randi sees few people at work besides her two bosses and the truck driver, Chaz, who often has lunch with her in her "Copacabana" room—a tiny room in the back of the building she took the liberty of decorating with an inordinate number of house plants. "They're used to be ferns growing wild all around, but they got out of control," she says. She has also "Randi-fied" her office with plants, nature pictures and photos of her horses.

Since the builders are all contracted crews, Randi never deals with them, nor does she deal much with the clients in her office. She's alone for most of the day and that's exactly the way she likes it. "I'm a loner. I don't want to deal with the public," she says.

Through the back doors walks a man with a big grin wearing work boots and a flannel shirt. Randi introduces Chaz and explains his job here. "He drives the lumber truck and picks up all the materials. He has a CDL. He goes, whether we're in North Jackson, which is where we're working now, or if it's in North

Carolina, he goes there. Sometimes we have to rent a big truck. He takes materials wherever we're building," she says.

Chaz's booming voices chimes in, "And I take care of all the animals," he says as he scratches behind Quincy's ears. On that note, he and Quincy run outside for a play break.

Randi works at the center of this business, keeping the paperwork organized, balancing their five checkbooks, talking to clients over the phone and collecting rent. "I have to go back and do the accounting, do profit and loss statement on random jobs from the year 2000 to the present. I have them all done, except for the last two years, I have to finish up. And then getting the tax returns copied and ready to go," she says of her work load for the day.

Randi fell into this job quite by accident. She and her husband ran into Jack and Marty, old buddies of her husband's, while out one day eight years ago. At the time, Randi had a month off from her old job as an assistant at the Sharon Hospital, working with autistic children. Jack and Marty were in a tight spot because their mother, who ran the office, had to leave for a while to take care of their sick father. Randi agreed to help them out for that month before returning to the hospital. "I was planning on going back after the month was through," she says.

After the month had passed, however, Jack and Marty asked her to stay, offering her better pay than the hospital and health insurance, which she would have no chance of receiving at the hospital. "It was a problem because my husband's self-employed [as a truck driver] and so we had our own private health insurance and it was *extremely* expensive. And I did the math and decided to stay here with Peoples Building Co."

When she first started, she had no one to train her. She admits that she messed up a lot in the beginning and that her "training" was simply trial and error. "I was often making mortgage payments out of the wrong account and making deposits into the wrong account," she says of her confusion over the business's five checkbooks.

"I just started digging through and I'd say 'I don't even know how to do a 941 tax payment,' so I'd look back and see how it was done before and figure it out and write notes to myself. Actually, the only skill I came in here with is I'm a hell of a typist," Randi says about those first days at Peoples Building.

She sits at a desk that is covered with neat piles of paperwork. She shuffles around some papers and explains her setup, "I actually cleaned everything up, because it looked so trashy. When I'm diving into something, I got piles of paper everywhere, but I know where everything is. I know what I got going on. So, if they ask me for anything, I can stop and do it and still know where I'm at."

Randi finds it odd that she works at a job like this one. She does not think in a linear fashion about time, numbers, space. She does not think about time in half hour intervals, nor does she care to wear a watch or know what the "real" time is. Her thoughts shift from this life to past lives in an instant, and yet she lives fully in each moment. As she evaluates these traits of hers, she laughs about being in a job where she "counts paperclips" and keeps things in a very orderly fashion, dealing with numbers for most of the day. She finds that her job description and her personality couldn't be more opposite. "It's a good job," she says, "it just surprises me."

In many ways, though, she *can* understand why she gets along with the job so well. She likes to be alone, she gets to wear her blue jeans to the office and bring her dog with her to work. She likes that she doesn't have to "dedicate a lot of my salary to my wardrobe, to what I look like." Most importantly, she makes enough money to take care of her animals. "It's not my passion, but it funds my passion," she says of her job.

During her lunch break, she'll sometimes run down the road to her barn to unwind with her horses. She and her husband built the barn recently, with the

guidance of Jack and Marty. It is constructed from wood left over from barns they built for their clients. Taking good care of the environment and her horses is a top priority for her. "We were so happy with the fact that we were using material that would have otherwise been burned or discarded, so we thought we were doing a great service, recycling materials. We tried to be very conscious of the materials we were using," she says proudly.

The barn houses three horses: Karma—a spunky mare and Randi's first horse, Bodhi (short for bodhisattva)—a gentle old quarter horse/walking horse, and the newest addition to the family, Indigo—a small Tennessee Walking horse who serves as Randi's trail buddy. The barn also houses a gazillion stray cats who seem to know about Randi's free handouts.

The smell of horses, hay and wood fill the barn. The sound of the rain hitting the roof, the clomping of hooves and the munching of hay are the only sounds here. A lovey-dovey kitten, who is new to the barn and doesn't yet have a name, jumps up onto Indigo's stall door. Randi pulls her off and warns her of the dangers of getting stomped. She doesn't listen and jumps right back on, too curious to heed safety rules. Randi pulls her off and reluctantly agrees to hold her. She reclines in her lawn chair with the kitten crawling all over her.

This is Randi's life and she loves it. "It's a good life," she says. "We don't have any big desires to have this big house, just a little house. All we want is to enjoy life. I don't think life is about a job anyway. It's not about that," she says dreamily as she speaks to the kitten.

She works four days a week at the office and spends the rest of her time here, at the barn, or on the trails with her horses. She finds it sad when she sees other people her age who are still spending all of their time working, rather than having a life. She sees a lot of people hoarding their money for things she doesn't understand. "You're 55, when are you going to start living?" she often thinks to herself.

Randi is passionate about this topic and feels remorse for those who haven't found their happiness like she has. She has a pretty clear idea of what she wants out of life and what she thinks she's here for. She has an idea about her death, too. "I don't want my tombstone to say, 'Here lies Randi, she had a big house and a shiny car and, boy, was her house clean.' I just want it to say 'Somebody said 'Go, girl.' and she did. She lived her life. She had a life. She had dirt under her finger nails and wore cowboy boots.' I just want to be out of the box and not a cliché."

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