



FROM YOUTH AMBASSADOR TO *Entrepreneur*

Cooperative education transforms to small business success

Former Jackson Electric Youth Ambassador Stephanie Pipkin transferred the leadership skills and cooperative knowledge she acquired during the program into a successful start-up business, Serene Clean. “The leadership and training I received during the program and by attending the Youth Leadership Congress at UW-River Falls prepared me to have confident conversations with professionals and people that otherwise might seem intimidating,” she says. “The cooperative focus on service and the local community helped me shape the design of my business.”



What started out as a side hustle has grown into a successful small business for owner Stephanie Pipkin.

What started out as a side hustle out of 22-year-old Stephanie’s apartment in 2019 has grown into a successful small business that employs 30-plus community members, with locations in Black River Falls, Sparta, and La Crosse. Stephanie chose to start her business in this area because it has always been home, and family is important to her. She explains how starting a professional or home service in a small town has its benefits: “People were willing to give me a try and I felt very supported by people who didn’t know me personally,” she says. “I believe there are more opportunities to be welcomed and received here than in a larger city. Our area is fantastic for supporting small businesses.”

Following graduation from Melrose-Mindoro High School, Stephanie attended Western Technical College to earn an associate degree in marketing while also waitressing to pay expenses, something she had done since high school. She gained experience working as an office manager for her family’s company for 3.5 years, which allowed her to apply her marketing degree and learn about invoicing, bookkeeping, and the behind-the-scenes work that keeps businesses running smoothly. “I’ve always had an entrepreneurial desire within me, and working for the family business inspired me to start my own,” she says. “Initially, I started my business as a side hustle on nights and weekends.”

Business grew more quickly than Stephanie expected. Within two months of opening, she was already hiring part-time staff. While it all sounds easy, Stephanie notes that starting out was not without its challenges, with the primary challenge being that she was still working full-time. “You

have to support yourself before the business can support you,” she explains. “I wasn’t always able to provide an immediate response to clients, and many clients preferred to have their homes cleaned during the day.”

Prior to the COVID shutdown, things were going well, and business was booming. Then, Stephanie had to navigate the new challenge and reality of COVID concerns. How can you run a business that depends on going into people’s homes? Fortunately, many commercial accounts doubled their need for cleaning service because they were essential businesses. “I was able to cover payroll for my staff through the small business paycheck protection program,” Stephanie says. “Before restrictions were lifted, we donated cleanings to local churches and other small businesses before they reopened.”

Service to the community is a value Stephanie strives to include in her business operations any time the opportunity arises. Every month for the past four years, Serene Clean has operated a giveback program where an employee selects a local nonprofit organization for the business to donate to. Stephanie has also developed a new nomination program. “Through the free cleaning nomination system, you can nominate someone to receive a free house cleaning that may be going through a tough time or cannot physically clean their home due to an injury or medical condition. We have also partnered with Cleaning for a Reason, which provides cleaning services for cancer patients,” she explains.

The business is also rooted in the family-first mindset. Stephanie notes that following COVID, it was difficult to hire



Another way Serene Clean gives back to the community is through this Adopt-A-Highway section near Sparta.

staff; it wasn't that people didn't want to work, but they were used to flexibility. This prompted Stephanie to highlight the flexibility that she could offer to employees unable to work full-time hours. "I want to be an employer that no one has had before. I want my employees to feel heard, respected, and be proud of where they work," she says. "We genuinely want their feedback and ideas on what we can do better."

Another one of the challenges of a service business is maintaining a positive experience for both your clients and your staff. Serene Clean chooses to work with clients and staff whose values match the business's. This means that Stephanie is sometimes faced with the difficult decision to let go of clients or employees. "Cleaning is a vital service that not everyone can do well. There is a lack of respect and a stigma surrounding service jobs; we have had clients disrespect our staff," Stephanie explains. "The people that work for me are highly intelligent individuals that are excellent at what they do. We hire staff that have a positive outlook and are a good fit to maintain our strong team."

Serene Clean's pursuit for excellence is grounded in integrity, which is demonstrated by their less than 1 percent (0.7%) complaint rate over all appointments during the last four years combined. With over 180 appointments each week, this is a number to be proud of. Stephanie takes client reviews seriously. "We always want to be sure we are providing the best service we can. If a client or employee brings something to our attention, it's an opportunity to do better," Stephanie shares. "Oftentimes, it's not that you missed the mark; it's how you handle the situation with integrity and make it right."

With a revamped business plan, business began to flourish following the lift of COVID restrictions, to the point that Stephanie opened the Sparta and La Crosse locations and hired three managers. Soon thereafter, she received a government subcontract to help clean at Fort McCoy where the Afghan refugees were housed. She was on site seven days a week, ten hours per day. "It was a learning and eye-opening experience," Stephanie shares. "The business had to run without me, and it demonstrated how wonderful my management staff and cleaning team are and that I can trust my employees so explicitly."

Stephanie's original intent was to provide only residential cleaning services. However, she learned that many commercial businesses in the area struggle to hire and retain their own janitorial staff. Serene Clean now has over 85 commercial clients with cleaning services ranging from once a month to twice a day. "We provide our commercial clients with a clean and sanitary workplace that they are proud to walk into, and that their staff don't have to clean. We have an extensive quality control program in place to ensure Serene Clean's high cleaning

standards are always being met and each account is taken care of," Stephanie shares. "We were even contracted to clean the restrooms at the Jackson and Trempealeau County Fairs this past year."

Stephanie applies her college education to her current role in the business, developing all the marketing, branding, and social media content. She is also expanding into consulting services to help others develop a successful business model. "Our business now runs like a well-oiled machine, and I have been able to consult with aspiring and current business owners across the country and even outside the United States," she says.

While Stephanie has achieved much success, she says it wasn't so simple. The key to being a successful business owner is being able to wear multiple hats and understand what is important. She lists all of the details that people often don't think about: "You have to be on top of paying taxes, constantly monitor Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) like revenue vs. expenses and number of reviews and complaints, perform production rate audits, ensure OSHA compliance, research and implement useful software, and check in on hundreds of clients and dozens of employees to keep everyone as happy

as possible. There are a million things that could potentially go wrong at any moment, so learning to roll with the punches and adapt quickly to the situation at hand is crucial," she explains. "You also need to understand what you're good at and what you're not. You can't say yes to everything."

Stephanie concludes with words of encouragement to anyone who is interested in pursuing their own business venture. "If you show up when you're supposed to, communicate, and do a great job, you are already beating the competition," she explains. "I would recommend any young person to start a professional or home service in a small town. There's a low start-up cost, you don't need a four-year degree, and working for other small businesses will give you the experience and knowledge to be successful."—*Brandi Shramek, Member Relations Advisor*



**S E R E N E
C L E A N**

Learn more about Serene Clean's giveback program, services, and client testimonials:

Website: www.serene-clean.com
Phone: 715.204.4270
Facebook: www.facebook.com/serenecleanwi

Serene Clean offers two types of residential cleaning:

1. Standard house cleaning following an extensive checklist, so everyone knows what tasks are going to be performed.
2. Deep cleans for move in or move outs of vacant homes. This is top to bottom from ceiling fans to baseboards, cupboards to appliances, and everything in between. Appliances and cupboards can be an add-on to your regular service.



MEMORIES ARE IN THE PHOTOS



Mike Bowler in the milkhouse, March 1951.



Mr. and Mrs. Chas Nordstrom and county agent Walt Bean, Grassland contest, March 1951.



Mr. and Mrs. Geo Humphrey celebrate 53 years of co-op teamwork, March 1945.



Walter Bean receives a TV set in recognition of his efforts in Jackson County, March 1953.

ZOOMING IN ON KYLE

Many lineworkers become interested in the profession after watching a family member make it into a successful career. One of the newest members of Jackson Electric’s line crew, Kyle Steien, is no different. A 2021 graduate of Blair-Taylor High School, Kyle decided to follow in his dad’s footsteps by enrolling in Chippewa Valley Technical College’s electrical distribution program. “I was on the waiting list for one year before I could begin the program,” Kyle shares. “During that time, I worked for local farmers, coached the Blair-Taylor basketball C-team, and worked on my family’s home farm.”



Following completion of the nine-month program, Kyle was hired as one of three new apprentices to join the Jackson Electric team. Kyle’s primary responsibilities as an apprentice include de-energized groundwork, which may involve shoveling, prepping the site, and making sure the journeymen linemen have the supplies they need for the job. “I enjoy being able to work outdoors, and I look forward to becoming a journeyman in the next four years,” he says.

When Kyle’s not at Jackson Electric or working on the farm, you’ll find him fishing, hunting, playing softball or basketball, or helping the neighbors in the summer.

Q: Are you a morning person or night owl?

A: I’m a night owl. I can stay up late, but getting up in the morning is more of a bear.

Q: What song is the soundtrack of your life?

A: International Harvester. That describes my life on the farm pretty well.



DID YOU KNOW?



Jackson Electric’s average meter per mile of line is 5.6. An average meter per mile of line for an investor-owned or municipal utility is 50-60 and they’re able to collect 10 times more revenue than your electric cooperative, Jackson Electric.



RULES OF THE ANNUAL MEETING

These rules are set in accordance with Jackson Electric Cooperative Bylaws, Article II, Section 7. Jackson Electric Cooperative's annual meeting will be held on Tuesday, May 14, 2024, at the Lunda Theatre in Black River Falls.

Annual Meeting Rules

1. The meeting will be conducted in accordance with Roberts Rules of Order Newly Revised edition.
2. Any speaker must be recognized by the Chair before speaking.
3. Only members and duly registered guests will be recognized by the Chair; each person so recognized must give his or her name.
4. Unless otherwise approved by the Chair, those recognized are to limit their questions and comments to three minutes, with any rebuttal limited to two minutes.
5. Questions and comments from members and duly registered guests will be in order during old and new business sessions, and at the conclusion of the officer reports, if invited.
6. No resolution affecting Jackson Electric Cooperative may be submitted by any member, unless written copies have been received by Jackson Electric Cooperative by March 20, 2024. This will permit time for review by the Jackson Electric Cooperative Board of Directors to make its recommendation to the meeting as to approval or rejection.
7. No signs or handouts will be permitted within the building of the place of the meeting, except such handouts as required for the official conduct of the Annual Meeting. No handouts made available outside of the building will use the name of the Cooperative, its letterhead or logo to imply that the Cooperative supports or opposes any resolution.
8. No demonstrations shall be held within the building of the place of the meeting.

Annual Meeting Voting Procedures

Voting may be by voice vote (one vote per membership)

UPCOMING DISTRICT MEETINGS

District meetings will be held in Districts #4, #5, and #7. Members who have a meter in each of these districts will receive a meeting notice via USPS with a mail date of March 18, 2024.

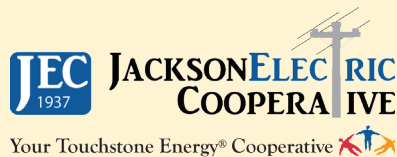
Meeting dates, times, and locations are as follows:

District #4 – Tuesday, April 2, 2024, 7:00 p.m.,
Taylor Community Center

District #5 – Wednesday, April 3, 2024, 7:00 p.m.,
Jackson Electric Cooperative

District #7 – Thursday, April 4, 2024, 7:00 p.m.,
Irving Town Hall

Call for District Director Nominations was published in the December 2023 issue of the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News*.



Customer Service 715.284.5385
800.370.4607
Outage Reporting 855.222.DARK (3275)
Diggers Hotline 800.242.8511
Card Payments 844.759.3984
www.jackelec.com   

Mailing Address: N6868 County Road F
Black River Falls, WI 54615
Office Hours: Monday – Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Board of Directors: Gary Woods, President
Chris Curran, Vice President
David Peasley, Secretary-Treasurer
Jerry Huber, Dairyland Power Representative
Dan Smrekar, Kristi Hanson, Brian Huber,
Troy Torkelson, Les Dokkestul
Kevin Babcock, General Manager/CEO

Jackson Electric Cooperative is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Your Touchstone Energy® Partner 