



WREN WORKS: STEPPING UP TO DELIVER CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

“OUR MISSION IS NOT TO BECOME A LARGE ORGANIZATION WITH FLASHY MATERIAL AND HIGH OVERHEAD, RATHER, WE SEEK TO REMAIN HUMBLE AND STRIVE TO PROVIDE OUR CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITY WITH SOLUTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL AND WASTE MANAGEMENT ISSUES THAT ARE EFFECTIVE AND AFFORDABLE.”

By Patrick Lapinski

Have you ever watched the television series *Dirty Jobs*? Wren Works lives that reality one unique job at a time. It's about thinking creatively and delivering unique solutions to problems faced by local businesses each day. People want to use us, is how Brook Benes explains it. It's as simple as that.

As one half of the husband-wife duo who run Wren Works, LLC., one unique project Benes discussed is the restoration of a portion of the Nebagamon Creek streambed, which feeds the Brule River. The potential collapse of the abandoned South Shore Railroad Grade over Nebagamon Creek is described as “one of most serious threats to the river.” The former rail line, used by visitors in the 1880s to the Winneboujou Station, has been slowly deteriorating the past 100 years, according to the Brule River Association.

“Currently we've got a stream restoration project in Lake Nebagamon which consists of excavating approximately 30,000 cubic yards of material and relocating it to a local gravel pit and rerouting the stream and adding components to the stream that will promote a better fishery,” says Benes.

Funding for the project comes from partnerships with the DNR (Department of Natural Resources) and some local trade associations and environmental groups. “It's my understanding there's been a large number of groups and people that have come together to pull together enough funding to make this project possible. So, it's an awesome project for us and we're having fun with it.”

Benes has earned a reputation for work on similar projects, such as the French Riv-

er and Cant River projects on the North Shore. “We've been known by a lot of engineering firms to do these kinds of projects. The big thing about this one, it's a tributary of the Brule River. So, the problem is with fish not being able to get upstream anymore for many years to spawn because of a failed culvert on an old railroad grade. We want to fix this and do it right.”

The Nebagamon Creek restoration isn't the largest or the most complex project Wren Works has undertaken, but it's the type of project that Wren Works takes great pride in. The restoration project is unique and impactful to the community and the environment. This is important as some of their core business tenets are to remain community minded and participate in projects that demonstrate their stewardship of the environment.

Wren Works was started in 2015 by Brook and Sandy Benes. “I was a general superintendent for one of the largest contrac-

tors in the Twin Ports (Reuben Johnson & Sons). I was running crews of sometimes up to 300-400 people at some point during the summer. I started the Marine Division with them and then the owners decided they were done and wanted to retire and shut the business down,” said Brook.

Benes had worked hand-in-hand with the owners at RJS for years, and Sandy was working in building construction with a residential and commercial elevator business. Combining their construction and financial management backgrounds, along with some handshake promises from some industry contacts, Benes thought they could make it work.

“I said ‘Well, we'll just start up on our own,’” laughed Benes, who admitted that Sandy gave him a long, hard look before agreeing to give it a go. “She looked at me a little funny and said, ‘You're crazy, but I'll support you.’”

If you ask Brook, his goal was simple, “Customers.” Sandy had a bit more of a





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measured response to Brook's hit-the-nail on the head approach.

She admits one of her main goals was "To become an entrepreneur instead of working for the man. We made the time, and we had the talents to take the risk; to see if we could do it, to make an impact for the good of the community. Brook is right when he says it - we took a risk when we first discussed it. In order to get into any sort of business you have to risk everything you have if you're going to do it well."

Special consideration went into the design of the Wren Works logo, which Sandy says they are asked about all the time. "The rye stalks represent a farmer and the most honest, hardest-working, honorable man we knew, Robert 'Wren' Sylvester, aka, Pa. May we all work and live by his example."

The business is headquartered in Poplar, where Wren Works has its administrative, accounting and project management teams, along with a 13,000-square foot heated shop for equipment and material storage. The marine fleet and related equipment are berthed at Fraser Shipyard, ready for any emergency response.



Wren Works operates as a 24/7 marine contractor, available for assistance or recovery for boating emergencies. This includes residential boaters, which Sandy says Wren Works will provide aid if requested. "We do recovery. Just in the last month we assisted in three boating incidents; one a stranded sailboat and the owner actually put an article in the Duluth News Tribune. Our abilities are diverse, and the best thing about that is we get to help people in need, and they really are forever grateful."

Sandy has more than 25 years of experience in the construction industry. Her bio sheet is an impressive scan of her career: "Estimating and Project Manager for heavy equipment projects, business management, financial budget preparation, business insurance, office and crew supervision, contract review, closed job accounting and payroll."

"Sandy's run the day-to-day operations in the office helping me bid till midnight, one o'clock since we started this,"





PHOTOS PROVIDED BY WREN WORKS



adds Brook with a lot of pride at her dedication. "Now, Sandy's out in the field a little bit more now that we've got a little more help in the office."

Brook has a similarly impressive resume of work experience as estimator, foreman, operator, captain and general superintendent. Did he say captain? Yes! As head of their marine services division, Benes holds a U.S. Coast Guard 100-ton Masters License with towing endorsements. Wren Works has a fleet of work and staging barges and a pusher tug, *Wren I*, on which Brook serves as Master, for harbor work.

"We put a focus on trying to stay local," said Brian Rankila, the "new kid" on the block with Wren Works. Rankila joined Wren Works in 2021 and is now a minority owner in the firm. "There's a lot of other contractors in town right now that really aren't local to the area, and when the work dries up, they'll just kind of keep moving on to the next location," he said. "We really focus on local projects that we ourselves can go fish the streams we restored and enjoy some of the projects that we performed; this includes the people that we employ throughout the summer and winter."

Rankila is responsible for procurement and project management of the Highway Heavy projects. "He's younger, faster, quicker thinking and Brook gets to let up a little bit," laughs Brook. "He's telling me what to do all the time. It's working out."

Rankila has vast experience in estimating, procurement and complete implementation of scope of work for projects. "I've got a comfy chair in the office," he says. "I try to do all I can to support the field from the office,

but when it is needed, I do go out in the field."

For Wren Works, out in the field could mean almost anywhere in the Twin Ports. "We've got a project on the horizon where we're going to be running 20 to 30 guys at the same job site, all performing different tasks," Rankila said. "I would say typically, we're running between four and eight jobs, and those jobs can vary from large to small. Admittedly, myself personally, I like the bigger ones because there's less logistics where we have to worry about moving equipment, moving guys and scheduling."

That said, the dry erase work board showed industrial remodeling work, concrete, shoreline and sheet piling jobs and some miscellaneous hauling jobs.

"We've got some master service agreements with other contractors in the area, we put our trucks to work hauling for them," Rankila explained. "We're well diversified right now. We're in about every corner of what we typically do."

The work known as Highway Heavy is as you might imagine – large-scale excavation, sheet-pile driving, building of support structures such as retaining walls, abutments, bridges, installation of culverts and drainage systems.

On the water side, the fleet assists with shipside repair, material and equipment transport, sheet pile wall construction, dredging, recovery and shoreline restoration.

There is sometimes a mix between ground forces and those afloat when Wren Works is involved in erosion and shoreline control projects, or above and below water demolition. The ability to work in both wet and dry environments is a great asset.

It is their customers who are near and dear to Wren Works and they are extremely grateful for the support given to Wren Works from the beginning.

In the beginning, "A Canadian National senior engineer out of Homewood, Ill., called us right away, he gave us a big job up in Ranier (Minn.)," Benes said. "Biggest job that we've had for the railroad. He just said 'Get up here. I need you up here. We'll get you going. We'll get you started. We'll get you signed up.' They gave us our major start, Canadian National."

The Wren Works team is thankful to everyone who gave them a chance. "We are talking from Hansen-Mueller, Peavey Elevator, Dans Feed Bin, Jeff Foster and Mont du Lac Resort. There's so many that helped us get started," Benes said "Everybody just gave us a little bit of work until we got going. Now we keep adding a little bit more, and a little bit more."



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In 2020, Wren Works was certified by the Small Business Administration as a Woman-Owned Small Business and in 2022 certification by both the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Transportation as a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise for work conducted under NAICS (North American Industry Classification System) code 237990 and 238910. Having the certifications was an important part of the process for Sandy.

"Starting out, I investigated marketing options to secure work not only locally but regionally," she explained. "As sole owner I

went through the long 8-month interview process with the SBA (Small Business Administration) to procure this designation."

"I sought this certification to expand our ability to bid and secure work on government set-aside contracts. The local construction business depends heavily on the financial health of the community and its residents. Procuring a WOSB (woman-owned small business) certification expanded our ability to procure and work outside the area in the event local construction was slow. Much like brick-and-mortar

small businesses, you rely on people calling or coming through the doors. The WOSB certification expanded our opportunities for business and put another tool in our toolbox," Sandy said.

Designations aside, you must be good at what you do to keep work coming, and the team at Wren Works never loses sight of that. "Locally there is no difference in being a WOSB," says Benes. "I am just another business owner. Flashy marketing materials are not important. What is, is a quality project, on-time and at budget."

Wren Works projects employ a lot of workers, many of whom are like family.

"We have our core set of employees, both union and office staff, that we try to employ year-round, which is not typical for a union company," explained Sandy. "At the high end, we may have up to 50 employees, but generally we're at about 20-25." She said that is their comfort level. "That way we can keep it family focused, and we know each other. Our employees are not just a number, they're people, and they're part of our work family."

Benes says it's important that employees get paid well, with good benefit packages and retirement.

"We know that they're all taken care of. We all know that everybody needs hours and how many hours they need a year to make sure they sustain for the whole winter if they get laid off. We'll make sure that they get enough hours that they have insurance for the offseason too," Brook said, returning to the theme of family and community.

Wren Works is proud to work with Operators Local 49 and 139, GLFA Local 49 and 139, Carpenters, Laborers Local 1091, and Iron Workers Local 512 in the Twin Ports area. The skills these men and women bring to the project, plus the specific skills they learn on projects, puts a lot of experience among the work crews.

Brook Benes believes in the value of a trained workforce. "There's a lot of learning. Once you teach these guys, you want to keep them around as best as you can."

There are some things, however, you just can't train anybody for, and that's when the fun begins.

"We were a part of the Levi LaVallee photoshoot in Duluth, where he jumped all our barges across the St. Louis River," Sandy said. In the spring of 2021, the Minnesota snowmobile stunt rider was in Duluth filming some of his famous stunt videos. One of the jumps required some support and Wren Works was soon on the set providing barges for one of the stunt jumps from the old Interstate Bridge.



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“LaVallee made the news when he landed in St. Louis Bay attempting the Rice’s Point stunt in which he jumps off the remains of the Duluth-Superior Interstate Bridge onto a series of barges,” wrote the Duluth News Tribune; a stunt which resulted in a few broken ribs and all-around good pounding.

Wren Works has built a reputation as the go-to guys for tough jobs, such as the 2018 move of the museum ship *William A. Irvin* out of an ice-locked slip, through a narrow bridge opening with literally inches to spare and across the bay to the shipyard. They love challenges and have a successful track record working through unique jobs. “A lot of the outside-the-box projects are often the most challenging and rewarding.”

Now that you know a little bit about who they are and what they do, don’t feel bad if you’ve previously never heard of them, they like to keep a low profile.

In the succinct words of Brook, “We love to step up when others won’t.” 📷

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who was born in Superior.

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