

CHANGE

*When dynamic force meets
unstoppable attitude*

By Celia Tarnowski
Photos by Jeff Frey

Sometimes change creeps slowly into our life, so indiscernible that it barely registers on our radar at the end of the day. Others find its arrival to be swift and bawdy, an instantaneous transformation that yields irreversible results. For Scott Stariha, change came into his life by way of the latter – a radical U-turn that would forever alter how he traveled down life’s pathway both figuratively and literally.

In the winter of 1978, Stariha was a 20-year-old newlywed who was excited about planning a future that included a good job on the railroad and building a family. Having just received his welding certificate from WITC-Superior the previous year, he was soon hired by Burlington Northern Railroad to work in their Bridge and Building Department. A position change placed him on an ore dock as a trapping machine operator.

“Change is all part of life and you either grow with it or stand still. I guess you can choose to get bitter or get better.”

“A trapping machine is an antiquated piece of equipment that you stand on as it goes alongside a railroad car,” says Stariha. “Basically, it’s an automatic wrench that spins and unlocks the hopper doors and allows the taconite in the cars to fall out into the pockets.”

Stariha was turning his trapping machine around to make his last pass for the day, a matter of just a few seconds and he would be clocking out. As the process began, the other train on the tracks was shoved back, hitting the nose of his machine. The impact pushed him against the car, crushing him between the trapping machine and the other railroad car. At that moment, a sound cut through the crisp December air that Stariha will never forget.

What Stariha heard was the noise his bones made as they shattered from the force of the collision. He was thrown out the side of the car, landing about 30 feet from where it happened.

Although he never lost consciousness, Stariha has no idea how he ended up that far from the train.

“My pelvis was crushed,” he says. “I had multiple compound fractures to my left leg, and there was absolutely no way I could walk, run, or move.”

The isolation of the ore docks and with only a small staff on site, Stariha knew the accident had left him in grave danger.

“I could literally feel life leaving my body. I knew if somebody didn’t come I would die,” Stariha says.

After a short while, two workers found him and rushed to get help. Arriving at the hospital in excruciating pain, the severity of his injuries hit home as a hospital priest was summoned to the emergency room to administer last rites. Stariha remembers a drop of oil the priest had placed on his forehead tracing a

path down his cheek as he drifted into unconsciousness.

Three surgeons worked frantically to keep him alive and save his leg. During the first surgery, Stariha literally died on the operating table and was brought back to life. He would not leave the hospital for three months. During his hospital stay, he endured 27 surgeries, received 69 pints of blood and had eight full body transfusions. While he survived the accident, a severe staph infection developed in his injured leg that brought him to the brink of death once more. Finally, the doctors had no choice but to amputate his leg above the knee.

A month after the emergency amputation surgery, Stariha was released home. He would spend the rest of that year recuperating and trying to make progress in physical therapy as he learned to walk on his prosthetic leg. Healing his physical injuries was only part of the process. A need to come to terms with such a life altering experience was another challenge he had to face.

“One day you’re healthy and can play any sport and the next day your appendage is gone . . . your whole world is different,” Stariha says. “Change is all part of life and you either grow with it or stand still. I guess you can choose to get bitter or get better.”

When asked how he was able to develop such a positive attitude with all he’d been through, Stariha sums it up with one word, “Faith.” He is convinced that his life story is a modern day miracle brought about through the support of his family, friends and community members.

Stariha tried to return to the railroad in a different position, but it proved to be too physically demanding. A counselor for the railroad asked him if he had ever considered going back to school to which

Stariha delivered the commencement speech to the class of 2008 as WITC-Superior's Distinguished Alumni of 2008.



Stariha was quick to answer “Never!” A self-proclaimed non-academic at the time, he had always enjoyed the social aspects of school more than the educational.

“I guess I chose not to be a good student,” he says with a laugh.

Nonetheless, he made an appointment to meet with a counselor at WITC-Superior. A career assessment test showed his strengths were in marketing.

With a great deal of trepidation, he registered for the Marketing program, and began what would be the first step in a long journey of both professional and academic success.

“I can still vividly remember my first day,” Stariha says. “I came in on crutches with a backpack thinking, ‘Wow! Can I really do this?’”

The first semester required a lot of commitment and determination from Stariha as he worked to make up for the coursework he had let slide in high school.

“It’s not easy,” he says, “but if you’re willing to put in the effort, the staff will help you get to the level you need to be at to succeed in your studies.”

Stariha found that attending WITC was

an entirely different experience than high school.

“WITC was a very warm environment and totally different than high school,” he says. “The faculty treated you like an adult. They weren’t just advisors, they became friends and they cared about your future and wanted you to get a good job.”

A committed and highly focused student, Stariha earned associate degrees in both Marketing and Transportation Distribution.

When asked if any instructors stood out, Stariha immediately begins going through a laundry list of instructors who made a positive difference in his college experience. He made close friendships with the custodial staff and still has coffee with retired staff member, Al LaValley, about once a month.

At the top of his list is Mimi Crandall, who was the lead instructor in his Supervisory Management courses.

“Mimi is one of the smartest women that I’ve ever met in my entire life,” Stariha says. “She really had a very unique way of instructing. I learned well under her style. She was a confidence booster. What a neat lady and what an asset to WITC!”

WITC offers instructors like Mimi Crandall who have gone out into the real world and worked in their field and then come back and share their experience.”

Crandall, now the Campus Administrator at WITC-Ashland and Vice President of Student Affairs for the college, has high praise for Stariha.

“He had a really ‘can-do’ attitude,” she says. “He knew he needed to go in a new direction and he did it. He really took on a leadership role and was a role model for other students.”

In 1987, Stariha was working toward a Supervisory Management degree when he was offered a position with The Glass Clinic, the largest single shop auto glass company in St. Paul, Minn. Within nine months of hiring, he was promoted to Director of Sales & Marketing.

He continued working there for two more years. During that time, Stariha attended night classes at WITC-New Richmond, earning the Supervisory Management degree he had started a few years earlier in Superior.

This spring, Stariha delivered the commencement speech to the class of 2008 as WITC-Superior’s Distinguished

Alumni of 2008, His heartfelt and inspiring speech was received with long and loud applause when he finished, a testament to his message and his ability to connect with people.

Today, Stariha and his wife, LouAnn, are the proud parents of four daughters: Danielle 27, Brooke 26, Lindsey 25, and Megan 19. He is an account executive for Otis-Magie Insurance Agency, Inc. in Duluth, Minn., and, along with his son-in-law Wes Kilgore, owns two Jimmy John sandwich shops located in Duluth and Superior. A highly successful businessman, he laughs when he recalls a conversation he had with a counselor from a four-year university years ago.

“Essentially, he told me that I would never make as much money with an associate degree from a technical college as I could by getting a degree from a four-year college.” Stariha says with a

wry smile, “I am very pleased with what WITC helped me accomplish monetarily. They gave me the tools to succeed both academically and financially.”

Yet Stariha has found much strength in himself to cope with the massive changes his life has seen.

“Change is a six-letter word that is filled with implications,” Stariha says.

That’s a powerful message which speaks to the notion that sometimes we chart our own course and sometimes life takes us along for the ride. Change also requires us to adapt, a skill that is necessary in our ever-changing world and one that most definitely can yield great rewards when it’s coupled with a strong work ethic and a positive attitude. ■

—*Celia Tarnowski is the marketing and public relations associate at WITC-Superior*

“WITC was a very warm environment and totally different than high school. The faculty treated you like an adult. They weren’t just advisors, they became friends and they cared about your future and wanted you to get a good job.”



Marketing

- Associate Degree (2 years)
- Offered at Ashland, New Richmond, Rice Lake, and Superior
- Students learn the latest marketing management, selling, buying, and merchandising skills. Focused on customer service, instructors help in understanding the importance of responding to customer preference for specific merchandise, and how to inspire a sales team.

Supervisory Management

- Associate Degree (2 years)
- Offered at Ashland, New Richmond, Rice Lake, and Superior
- WITC’s Supervisory Management degree is clustered into three management skill areas: Human Relations, Systems, and Quality. As students complete each cluster, they will learn the latest theories and practices that will help them to become an effective leader, and find a balance between infusing new ideas into an organization without leaving behind working systems.

Welding

- Associate Degree (1 year)
- Offered at Ashland, New Richmond, Rice Lake, and Superior
- Program follows the American Welding Society Skill Standards to provide useful welding theory, fabrication, layout, print reading, welding symbols, math, and welding codes.