

UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES BRING SUCCESS

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Photos by Greg Dahl and Deborah Anderson*

It all started with a 500-pound tractor tire rolling over him and pinning him against a rack. Today Jeff French lives to tell his journey of twists and turns through life. It's how a person deals with life's unknown journey that usually depicts the lifelong character. So it is with Jeff French, a Barron native who is highly regarded and well respected. So when life threw French the career-threatening blow, he faced the challenge, taking steps that lead him to a life as today's Barron County administrator.

French's life twisted and turned in 1986 when at work a 500-pound tire fell off a tractor and rolled him over. It pinned him against a rack, when he heard a sickening "POP!" in his back. But after he was freed from his painful position, French finished his shift. When the pain worsened and he finally saw a doctor, French was tossed the proverbial lemon: three disks and a vertebra were damaged, the doctor advising French to find another line of work that didn't require back-breaking tasks, at least physical ones.

Jeff French, Barron County administrator, considers himself "just an average guy." He credits the many mentors who have supported, encouraged and given him advice throughout his life.

French set out to twist this lemon into something more palatable. He'd shown an affinity for numbers while managing the Barron Farmer's Union Co-Op tire center when the accident happened, and some aptitude tests confirmed that talent. His interests and skills pointed him in a new direction – a career in accounting. He started classes at WITC, and continued to work nights at the Co-op.



Jeff French, Barron County administrator, explains budget items to county board members.



The Barron County Government Center features many WITC graduates.

Finding time to go to classes, study, spend time with his family and continue to work wasn't easy. He got up every morning as early as 3 a.m., studied until 5 a.m. and then headed to class. Even before finishing his associate degree, the hard-working French was hired as operations manager at Midwest Computer Services in Rice Lake. But with a WITC accounting degree and finance degree under his belt, he moved on to several accounting jobs – including one that had him commute to Hudson – and each with more responsibility than the last. Later he became Barron County's finance director and internal county auditor.

A lifelong learner, French earned a Master of Business Administration in 2007 from Lakeland College, and in 2008 was appointed interim county administrator. After succeeding at holding the two county jobs for six months, French was chosen from a field

of candidates to singularly hold the county administrator position.

This man who didn't let a back-breaking accident crush his life is now responsible for Barron County's day-to-day operations. That means days filled with budgets, research, back-to-back meetings and brain-breaking decisions that he honestly enjoys.

French wants to be a positive influence in others' lives, because he feels fortunate to have had so many mentors in his life. "I want students to have the same opportunities I've had," he says.

As a member of a WITC advisory committee, French advocates for what's in the best interest for students and to ensure WITC produces graduates with all the skills businesses need. French champions WITC as a great resource in Northwest Wisconsin and considers it a gateway to a career or to continue education. He proudly lists WITC grads working at the Barron County Government Building and encourages those who are looking to learn a career to consider WITC.

"(WITC) Students can receive an excellent education while saving money on tuition and decide for themselves how far to take it," he says. French chose to take education far – all the way from an unfortunate accident to success and respect as a county administrator. ■

Considering Finance or Accounting?

No longer relegated to a cube in the back with a computer and calculator, accounting and finance graduates in today's business world are an integral part of the management team, says Scott Elza, WITC Accounting instructor.

Ask yourself some questions: Do you like calculations, analyzing data, designing spreadsheets, taking raw numbers and formulating business conclusions? And importantly – are you self-motivated? Take a career assessment test and try out some general education requirements at WITC to see what career feels right for you.