Persevera

Carrying on th

Lessons learned at a parent's knee can take you far. Just ask Ken Ohlheiser. Born and raised alongside seven siblings in North Dakota, he paid heed to his family's long history of working for the U.S. Postal Service and followed suit. His spin on the story was to relocate his own young family slightly west and three states south to Colorado, where he founded Ohlheiser Trucking in 1979.

"The work appealed to me because I'd helped my dad carry out his postal duties," Ohlheiser says. "I also enjoyed the driving part and I liked the idea of being self-employed."

A FAMILY LEGACY

Nearly 40 years earlier, Ohlheiser's grandmother served as postmaster for the small town of Maida, North Dakota (population 245). For 25 years, she conducted operations out of her house, where customers would stop by daily to conduct postal business and pick up their mail, Ohlheiser says.

In 1962, Ohlheiser's mother was the first woman to be hired at the Grand Forks, North Dakota post office. Her hiring meant a lady's restroom had to be added to the building, Ohlheiser explains. Seven years later, his brother-in-law was hired at the same post office and went on to complete a 37-year career as a clerk.

But it was his father, Stan, who truly inspired the young Ohlheiser, planting the seeds for a future career. From 1964 to 1965, Stan Ohlheiser held two postal contracts in the Grand Forks area. One of his contracts would leave Grand Forks at 10 p.m. and return at 2:00 a.m.

"All of us children would take turns riding with Dad and would usually fall asleep before city lights were even in the rearview mirror," says Ohlheiser. "Then he'd wake whoever had accompanied him up at the outer termini town and buy them a big chocolate chip cookie. That made the whole trip worthwhile."

GOING HIS OWN WAY

For a while, Ohlheiser tried to ignore his destiny. In 1974, he earned an associate's degree in civil engineering technology at the North Dakota State School of Science and began working as a surveyor for an engineering firm. However, he found he didn't like the work well enough to want to continue to do it for the rest of his life.

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BY JUNE ALLAN CORRIGAN, CONTRIBUTING WRITER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB YOUNGER

Ken Ohlheiser and Merry Ohlheiser, Ohlheiser Trucking

Ohlheiser next went to work for a construction company operating heavy equipment, a job he settled into for several years. During that time, he was on vacation with his wife, Merry, and they happened to drive through Colorado on their way to California. They both fell in love with the Rocky Mountain state.

"We were on the I-25 corridor that runs north and south in Colorado and right through Fort Collins," Ohlheiser says, recalling the flat view they saw to the east and the awe-inspiring view of the Rockies to the west.

"It appeared to be the best of both worlds. We could feel like we were back at home when we looked to the east. And then if we looked to the west, there were the mountains with all the skiing, the whitewater rafting and the hiking," he says.

> *"The early years were as rocky as the mountains around us."*
>
> —KEN OHLHEISER, Ohlheiser Trucking

Someday, Ohlheiser told his wife, we're going to live here. As soon as they returned home, he began bidding on Colorado postal routes in hopes of starting their young adult lives in a dream locale.

It didn't happen right away. In fact, it wasn't until two years later in 1979, that they were the low bidder on a small route out of Fort Collins. Ohlheiser didn't waste any time building a box onto the back of a three-quarter ton pickup whereupon he, Merry, their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and ten-month-old son headed west with a $1,000 loan from his parents.

ROCKY TIMES

Uprooting and moving a young family three states away without money or a support network and zero experience running a mail contract isn't a recipe for success, Ohlheiser reflects now. "The early years were as rocky as the mountains around us! I have to give Merry credit for us making it through as there were several times I was ready to move back to North Dakota. However, she wasn't ready to give up."

Eventually life normalized and they settled in for the long haul. It was actually Merry who fulfilled their first mail contract while her husband continued to work construc-

tion. Perseverance was required because despite diligently applying, seven long years passed before the couple landed another mail contract.

Ohlheiser feels it was all worth it because he believes in the reliability of the U.S. Postal Service. "I like that the mail contracts are steady and you're going to get a check every month," he says. Back in the days when he had a young family, he especially liked the stability.

THE VIEW IS FINE

In time, the pair grew the business to encompass eight contracts, all within 70 miles of Fort Collins.

Along the way, Ohlheiser Trucking has picked up awards such as the 2011 Eagle Spirit Award from USPS and both the 2010 and the 2022 National Safety Award from Great Western Insurance. Not to mention, the Ohlheisers have learned many lessons about how to build and operate a successful mail contractor business.

"Education is power!" says Ohlheiser, who recommends networking with other contractors and learning as much about the business as possible.

"Be passionate about what you're doing," he advises, because he and Merry are certainly individuals who have persevered through their passion for the work. Despite divorcing in 2006, they remain business partners. Merry herself has endured two back surgeries from the job's physical demands.

> *"Be like a postage stamp. Stick to one thing until you get there."*
>
> —KEN OHLHEISER, quoting 19th century American humorist Josh Billings

These days, the company is down to three contracts, but Ohlheiser — who enjoys riding his motorcycle in spare moments — doesn't see himself ever completely retiring. "I enjoy what I do, so I plan to keep doing it. I might get down to one contract," he amends. Neither of their children are interested in taking over the business as they are each successful in their own chosen fields.

Ken is fond of a quote from 19th century American humorist Josh Billings who said, "Be like a postage stamp. Stick to one thing until you get there." It's a perfect metaphor for his life. ☆