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“When people come to us, we want to be the warmth of the sun to them”

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Lighting the way

Apricity fills the gap for businesses while supporting those in recovery



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Lighting

BY MARYBETH MATZEK

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way



Stepping outside on a cold winter day with the snow crunching under your feet, the warmth of the sun feels special — a stronghold of light in winter’s darkness — and defines the word apricity to a T.

When Michelle Devine Giese heard that definition, she knew immediately it was a fit for the new organization formed through the merger of STEP Industries in Neenah and the Mooring Programs Inc. in 2018. The merger created a one-of-a-kind recovery nonprofit organization providing treatment, employment, transitional living and education.

“The visualization of that word is so powerful on multiple levels and really fits in to what we do here,” says Giese, who became CEO of STEP Industries in 2009 and was selected to serve as the leader of the newly formed organization. “Addiction is a disease that robs a person of joy and leaves one feeling as though they exist under a cloud of despair. When people come to us, we want to be the warmth of the sun to them as they look to live in recovery and learn the skills they need to find meaningful work.”

It’s a story Giese has lived herself. Twenty-five years ago, she arrived at STEP Industries looking for a job in an environment supportive of people in recovery. Giese had recently become sober and found at her other workplace, her coworkers discussed going for drinks after their shift and she began to feel like an outsider for always saying no.

“My dad told me to take a year and just focus on my sobriety and not worry about my career,” says Giese, who turned that one-year job at STEP into a career, moving up the ranks to her role as CEO.

The conception of Apricity created a network that cares for people throughout each stage of recovery and puts them on the road to success — all while helping manufacturers complete a variety of jobs, says Mike Frisch, chair of the Apricity board of directors.

“There was a lot of collaboration going on and it was just a good fit,” he says. “We decided on the merger and completed it in one calendar year, which was a lot of work, but since we have common goals, we made it work.”

The combination of forces allows Apricity to provide treatment, housing support and training to between 300 and 350 people annually.

“Apricity is a complete ecosystem for those in recovery,” Giese says. “Clients receive the 30-day inpatient treatment to fight their addiction and then have the opportunity to get a job and still be able to make their meetings and appointments while learning valuable skills that will help them land a permanent job.”

“We want to help people move on ... we want a healthy turnover ... When we have that, we know we’re doing something right.”

Michelle Devine Giese, CEO, Apricity



Apricity employs 300 to 350 people annually through its vocational training program. At left, Apricity CEO Michelle Devine Giese shows her coin celebrating 25 years of sobriety.

CREATING OPPORTUNITY

An executive from Kimberly-Clark Corp. came up with the idea for STEP Industries in 1982. He envisioned providing those going through addiction recovery a place where they could learn real-life job skills while also helping manufacturers with their fulfillment needs. K-C was among the organization’s first customers.

“He learned unemployment was often a barrier for people living in recovery, especially those new to a sober life, and wanted to make a difference,” Giese says. “The stigma of addiction, combined often with a negative work record and a lack of self-confidence, can make it hard for them to find a job.”

Founded in 1975, the Mooring Programs is a state-certified Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse residential facility providing individualized, comprehensive treatment of alcohol and drug dependency, with Mooring House serving men and Casa Clare serving women.

“We were helping the same population and worked with Mooring Programs and Casa Clare residents here, but it wasn’t a complete connection,” Giese says. [continued] »

COVID’S IMPACT

Similar to other nonprofit organizations, Apricity is dealing with the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CEO Michelle Devine Giese says the company has lost a few production jobs as customers changed some of their products and has gained additional work as a seasonal project turned into one lasting six to eight months of the year.

The biggest impact has been in Apricity’s recovery services. Before clients can enter recovery at either Mooring House or Casa Clare, they need a negative COVID-19 test. After that, they are not able to see their families for 30 days.

“We used to allow visits, but we can’t do that anymore as we look to keep our clients and staff healthy,” says Giese, adding that clients are able to go without masks while in those first 30 days of recovery since there is a lot of building trust and by wearing masks, some people may miss nonverbal cues. “That was the hardest thing — telling people they couldn’t see their families. We’ve had people leave therapy because of that.”

Onsite Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings also have been canceled. Those meetings provided clients a connection with the outside world and helped many as they heard other people’s experiences. Former clients who attended those meetings have felt a loss, too.

“Addiction is lonely, recovery is not. Some people are grateful we’ve stayed open and continue to proceed with providing treatment,” Giese says. “There’s a short window where you can get someone into treatment and we don’t want anyone to miss that window because we’re closed.”

“We decided on the merger and completed it in one calendar year, which was a lot of work, but since we have common goals, we made it work.”

Mike Frisch, board chair, Apricity

Apricity

Headquarters: Neenah, with residential treatment facilities in Appleton and Grand Chute.

What they do: Ecosystem of recovery services from inpatient treatment to helping clients gain job skills. Provides businesses with assembly piece-work services.

Leadership: Michelle Devine Giese, CEO; Dan Haak, president of contract packaging and recovery support; and Jolie VerVoort, president of residential treatment.

Number of Employees: Approximately 45 permanent staff members. Between 300 and 350 individuals are trained annually in the vocational program.

Website: apricityservices.com

[continued] » “We did a lot of work together. I sat on the Mooring board and the Mooring leader sat on our board. We also shared a board treasurer.”

There had been talks of a merger before, but when the Mooring Programs’ leader left in 2017, the time finally seemed right to act, Frisch says. “The result is that we were able to open up more opportunities for our clients and more opportunities for the staff,” he says.

Giese is well-suited to her role leading the combined organization — she holds a business administration degree from the University of Wisconsin-Stout, an AODA certificate from UW-Madison and a substance abuse counseling certificate from Fox Valley Technical College. This allows her to deeply understand the two distinct sides of Apricity — the treatment processes and business operations.

She says the merger happened quickly, creating some whirlwind months, but now the two staffs are one and are better able to help their clients since the communication between the staff at the homes and the production facility has improved. “We’re using the same language, creating more

stability and continuity,” Giese says.

The merger also combined STEP’s sober living homes with the Mooring Programs’ services. The sober living homes often are the next step for people as they move on from the 30-day inpatient programs.

“For so many of the people we work with, they may be living with or hanging out with friends that may not support their recovery, leading people to easily slip back into old habits,” Giese says.

Another aspect setting Apricity apart is that nearly all of its permanent staff has been affected by addiction in one way or another. That brings a whole different perspective to their work, Giese says.

FILLING A NEED

Besides helping people through the recovery process, Apricity plays a vital role in assisting businesses through a variety of services, from its production offerings to guiding them in creating a recovery-friendly workplace. And through it all, the organization continues to serve its clients by helping them prepare for a job and future after they leave the program.

Castle Pierce, a flexible packager and commercial printer in Oshkosh, began working with Apricity in 2013 and found it a good partner to get projects done, says CEO Tom Castle.

“We rely on Apricity primarily for projects involving a lot of hand assembly,” he says. “Our team is very busy and Apricity helps us to cover a large commitment of hours within a short window of time.”

In addition to its Neenah production facility, Apricity has a contract packaging facility in Milwaukee that works with local recovery services. Apricity also holds ISO certification, which Giese says shows customers the organization follows strict protocols and procedures that adhere to consistent, quality work.

“The ISO certification really gives us credibility. We are training all the time and the ISO auditors say they use us as an example with training,” she says. “People can learn a lot of new skills here, whether it’s leadership skills,



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF APRICITY

Apricity provides 30-day residential recovery programs for men at its Mooring House location and for women at Casa Clare.

how to drive a forklift or another skill that will help them down the road.”

The ISO certification provides customers with more confidence in saying “yes,” says Cheryl Fritz, Apricity’s business development manager. She’s tasked with attracting new customers and projects.

“It shows our customers we have documented processes and procedures. Plus, we’re audited. That can be attractive to some customers because it’s an outside party who says we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing,” Fritz says. “Sometimes when customers learn about our employees, that’s the icing on the cake.”

Castle says he expects Apricity employees to deliver work at the same uncompromising level of quality that Castle Pierce holds its own employees to.

“This quality expectation extends to both the consistency and accuracy of their work, as well as the timely completion of a project,” he says. “Apricity knows that our customers rely on us. They work very hard to ensure that they do not break that trust.”

Keeping that trust requires consistent work and making sure the production workers — who change on a regular basis — are quickly catching on to the expected work.

Dan Haak, Apricity’s president of contract packaging and recovery support, came to the organization while he was in recovery in 1998 and like Giese stayed on, moving into new positions of increasing responsibility. In his role, he oversees packaging and assembly processes, hiring and scheduling as well as Apricity’s three sober living houses and the vocational training center.

“For some of our employees, they need help with getting jobs and we do what we can, such as helping them connect with necessary training, cleaning up their resume, getting back their license or whatever they need” to land a permanent job, says Haak, adding Apricity helps clients with other needs, such as opening a new bank account.

Many new employees walking into Apricity also need to improve their soft skills, he says.

“Talking about soft skills is part of every workday. We talk about the importance of showing up on time, how to work together as a team and what the goal for the day is,” Haak says. “We also celebrate successes and provide a safe environment where workers can talk about their recovery, which is something they might not be able to do in another workplace.”

When Fritz reaches out to potential customers, she’s looking for manufacturers that need some extra help, whether it’s putting together a special kit featuring a variety of products or working on another specialty product, such as certain displays used during the holidays.

“Some manufacturers don’t necessarily have the people and space dedicated to this work,” Fritz says. “We have some regular projects and others that are one-off. The type of work flexes, which is nice.”

Beyond providing manufacturers with extra help when they need it, Apricity also offers educational programs to help employers create their own recovery-friendly workplace. The organization recently received a grant to fund the initiative, which shows employers, for example, that instead of planning an activity where alcohol tends to be involved, maybe the business should look to other activities, such as participating in a charity walk, Giese says.

“For people living through recovery, being surrounded at work by activities that tend to involve alcohol, it can be really tough,” she says. “You need to provide alternatives.”

Giese says everything works together at Apricity to provide clients with a healing, holistic approach. “We work with our clients to set goals — not just about work — and hold them accountable,” she says.

“We want to help people move on ... we want a healthy turnover” of workers, she says. “When we have that, we know we’re doing something right.” 

ONLINE: Listen to Apricity CEO Michelle Devine Giese discuss the organization’s role in providing those in recovery with vital work experience.





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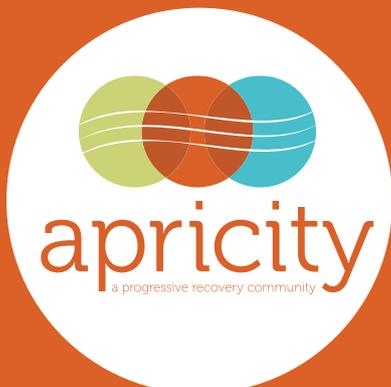
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Apricity is the only full-spectrum recovery program in the country that provides inpatient, transitional residential treatment, mental health counseling, recovery support services, sober living, employment and job readiness training.