

BERKS WEEKLY

VOL. 1 NO. 4

LESLIE ESTERLY



**PLACING CHILDREN WITH
MULTIPLE DISABILITIES
ON A PATH TO REACHING
THEIR GREATEST
POTENTIAL**



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Inside This Issue

- 03** Reading & Northern Railroad unveils its first Semiquincentennial locomotive
- 04** Pastor Bruce Osterhout – Decades in urban ministry inspire generations of local families
- 06** Shaped by Shillington: Michael Pinto's childhood memories inspire community service
- 08** Leslie Esterly: Placing children with multiple disabilities on a path to reaching their greatest potential
- 10** Passion & purpose: Inside Rosanna's Choice Café, a new downtown haven
- 12** Wanda Holdren: serving as a role model while raising the bar for aspiring young dancers
- 14** From dangerous heights to careful precision: Josh Spudeno reflects on life in the tree service business

Editor's Note

This issue highlights the people whose dedication and work quietly shape life across Berks County. From entrepreneurs and business owners to faith leaders, advocates, and skilled tradespeople, these stories reflect a shared commitment to service, growth, and community. Inside, you will meet individuals driven by purpose—whether through mentorship, creative expression, caregiving, or hands-on work that supports others. Each feature offers a glimpse into the experiences and values that inspire people to give back in meaningful ways. Thank you for continuing to support local journalism that focuses on the people behind the stories and the communities they help strengthen every day.

— Jason Hugg, Editor

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Reading & Northern Railroad unveils its first Semiquincentennial locomotive

NEWS



Always looking to the future, the Reading & Northern Railroad has unveiled its first diesel locomotive featuring a patriotic design celebrating the upcoming 250th anniversary of the United States in 2026. The company also announced that the paint scheme was conceived by one of its own team members.

Reading & Northern engine #3061, a General Motors model SD40-2 diesel locomotive, was selected by the company to be repainted into the colors of our country to celebrate the coming year's monumental occasion. Taking advantage of the car body's length, the 3,000-horsepower locomotive's long hood is dressed in red and white stripes to resemble the American flag. The cab is blue and adorned with thirteen stars on the nose. It has been fittingly renumbered 1776. The paint scheme was designed by Evan Kerr, a six-year veteran of Reading & Northern who serves as a conductor, engineer, and dispatcher.

The SD40-2 is widely regarded as one of the most reliable, and therefore best-selling, diesel locomotives in history. Hence it is well-represented on the Reading & Northern roster, with a total of twenty units. They can be seen all over the railroad, hauling everything from unit coal trains to general merchandise. As with SD40-2 #1983, which was painted to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the railroad in 2023, #1776 is sure to be a popular sight among train enthusiasts and the public. With the passenger department already planning several special events centering around the Semiquincentennial, #1776 may even make appearances on excursion trains in 2026.

Perhaps most fittingly, the locomotive was unveiled on Veterans Day. Paint Department Manager Zach Frye said "This engine is one of the most beautiful and passionate projects ever taken on by the paint shop. Our crew of five people were able to turn this engine into a masterpiece in just one month's time. We are very proud to introduce locomotive #1776 for all to see."

Reading & Northern Railroad, with its corporate headquarters in Port Clinton, is a privately held railroad company serving over 80 customers in nine eastern Pennsylvania counties (Berks, Bradford, Carbon, Columbia, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Northumberland, Schuylkill, and Wyoming).



Pastor Bruce Osterhout – Decades in urban ministry inspire generations of local families

Written by: Phyllis J. McLaughlin

In 1986, when Pastor Bruce Osterhout accepted his first call as a youth minister at Christ Lutheran Church in Roanoke, Virginia, he brought with him all of his experiences growing up in Southern California that inspired him to choose a career in ministry.

“I was active in the church my entire life, as were my parents and siblings. My experiences at summer camp during my middle school and high school years were very formative. While working on the staff, teaching and taking care of kids, I realized my passion for this type of ministry.”

One summer at camp working as a lodge keeper, responsible for 21 meals per week, washing dishes, and keeping the kitchen stocked, Pastor Bruce, as he is well known, discovered his true calling. “The camp director, Pastor Henry McKay, showed me what a pastor could do in an outdoor ministry. I was around college students then, and thinking about seminary. Around this time we moved to Thousand Oaks, California where I attended high school. I visited UCLA with the intention of studying political science, but I questioned whether I wanted to go to this big school. My Pastor, Roger Anderson advised me to consider California Lutheran University if I was inclined toward ministry. When my family moved to New Jersey, I stayed in California. In Thousand Oaks my part time job during college was co-youth director at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. Our youth program was very active, and we raised money for good causes around the world and had a lot of fun doing it. I declared a major in Religion and got to hang out with students from seminary. After two years I was



part of the Youth Staffer program for the Lutheran Church of America. I was interviewed and was placed to do youth ministry in Roanoke, Virginia by my supervisor Pastor Dwayne Westerman. By the following summer he had me leading worship at three-point parishes in the Shenandoah Valley. I was twenty and I considered that my first internship. As a youth staffer we received training at Elizabethtown College, and I was part of the first National Youth Gathering at Purdue University in 1981 which hosted 6,000 students. I made the choice to join my family in New Jersey and ended up finishing my degree at Upsala College in East Orange, NJ, the most diverse Lutheran College in a very urban setting. When I graduated from Upsala, my professor/advisor was chair of the examining committee as I was completing the process to enter into seminary.”

Pastor Bruce Osterhout received his first official call to ministry in 1986 as an associate pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Roanoke. After a few years he had the desire to move his young family closer to extended family. “In 1989 I started looking for a church up here, and Bishop Harold Weiss directed me to a church in

the Glenside neighborhood of Reading with sixty people in worship and four kids. People told me I’d have to be crazy to go to a housing project neighborhood, but we sold our house in Virginia and moved here.”

The congregation at Christ Lutheran Church gave him his assignment: go and get kids. The church which once thrived, with families living within walking distance, began to change as the demographics of the neighborhood became more diverse. “When I see kids, I see kids; not Black, White, Hispanic. Soon I started an afterschool program at the church. I would walk the kids down from the Glenside school to receive tutoring after school and a snack.”

The program was a success, and the children easily related to Pastor Bruce’s bubbly and funny personality. He had a way of turning anything mundane into something fun. Homework, reading, and learning became something to look forward to after a long day at school. He was a very visible presence in the community, leading the kids down to the church after school.

“The congregation became engaged with the Glenside school through our tutoring program, and we established a good relationship with them. RACC was looking for opportunities to do programming in the Glenside neighborhood, so an Evenstart Family Literacy program was initiated at the church to support 10-12 women with ESL while providing childcare. I applied for grants to support a Women’s Center where women from the community gathered to set goals for themselves and received the support and encouragement to achieve them. We partnered with the Greater Berks Food Bank to set up a neighborhood food pantry, and we actively became involved with Habitat for Humanity.”

The church became a community hub and a welcoming place for all. On certain days it seemed to be the place to be, with children busy with tutoring and activities, mothers working on their personal goals in another area, which eventually morphed into a full evening of mothers making dinner and children helping to serve it, often hosting up to 100 people. With the public housing project located directly across the street, the church was never at a loss for kids who could often be found hanging out in the church yard just to be there.

It was at this point that Pastor Bruce partnered with the YMCA to host a seven-week summer camp which flowed for 20 years. The church became a second home to so many children and youth during that time period and produced leaders both in the church and in the community at large. Pastor Bruce Osterhout is known for his strong focus on youth ministry here in Reading with a unique ability to create opportunities and engage youth and families, particularly in the Glenside neighborhood. He is presently working with the third generation of some families.

How can churches best serve the communities where they are located? “Know your community, know your neighborhood. Pay attention to the neighbors; the congregational membership has to reflect the community. Glenside became diverse, and it is a diverse crowd, very multicultural every Sunday in worship.”

Pastor Bruce is also involved with the other Lutheran churches in Reading through the Pretzel City Parish, working collectively for the betterment of the city. “Diversity is a blessing in every way, and we need to lift that up. I think Reading is the real America, and appreciating that is celebrating that. We have got a ways to go.”

Shaped by Shillington: Michael Pinto's childhood memories inspire community service

Written by: Phyllis J. McLaughlin

Lifetime resident Michael Pinto has fond memories growing up in the Shillington community. Riding his bike through the tree-lined streets, summertime at the pool, attending Mifflin schools, and witnessing the Governor Mifflin Community Days inaugural festival and fireworks display during the 1976 Bicentennial.

Although Michael works full-time as a principle IT architect for a national company, he devotes much of his time to his community through volunteering in various capacities to help enhance the quality of life for Shillington residents. We were able to catch up with him during the height of one of the community's biggest events, Community Days, to learn more about his volunteer activities with the Shillington Tree Advisory Committee (STAC), Governor Mifflin Community Days, The Shillington Civil Service Commission and Grace Lutheran Church in Shillington.

Michael explains, "The Shillington Tree Advisory Committee is a second generation of community members who have an interest in the tree canopy in Shillington, so we can't take full credit. There was an early version in the 1990s which essentially died from ageing out and from a lack of volunteers. Volunteers are definitely an endangered species.

From a personal perspective, growing up in Shillington, I was

accustomed to tree-lined streets everywhere in the borough. In 2010, Council member Elizabeth Bentz held a meeting to discuss what we could do to improve the community. During the meeting, we noted the lack of trees and education on planting trees. Residents Britta and John Hyneman helped to form STAC to focus on replacing and planting street trees within the borough."

In spring and fall, residents have the opportunity to have trees planted in front of their property free of charge. Michael fields calls from residents and helps to coordinate their requests to have trees ordered and planted by the committee of volunteers. Since 2010 STAC has planted over 450 street trees in the borough and continues to seek out new ways of creating an awareness of the value of trees in the community.

At the time of our interview, Michael was in the process of gearing up for the annual Governor Mifflin Community Days celebration. His connection to this annual event is personal, due to the fact that his mother was one of the event founders, helping to plan the first event in 1976. It was a success, and the organizers decided that they wanted to form an organization for the benefit of the community, and going forward, the event became known as Community Days.

"The organization hosts a week long fair; its core mission is to give back



to the community and to generate the funds to allow that to happen. Each year we present four scholarships to graduating seniors and give out over a half-million dollars to various community organizations like the library, Boy Scouts, ambulance, and fire police. It is a year long process, and I've been on the board for 21 years, serving as chair of digital publications."

In addition, Michael has served on the Shillington Civil Service Commission as Secretary for 20 years. The organization is appointed by Borough Council, overseeing hiring and promotions for the Shillington Police. For the past seven years, he has been an active member of the prop-

erty committee at Grace Lutheran Church, where he is a lifetime member.

Why does he volunteer? "From the trees and seeing a problem of losing so many, I wanted to be part of the solution. Community Days is a family legacy. I enjoyed these things as a child growing up in Shillington and I wanted them to continue. Each generation needs to step up and make it happen. Things don't happen in a vacuum. They don't just appear, we need volunteers. These organizations help to fill in the gaps and enhance the quality of life in every community by providing support. The country has been based on volunteer organizations, and they are the core foundation of the country."

For the past 19 years, Leslie Esterly has been working with the youngest of students in the Reading School District challenged with multiple disabilities and supporting each of them on a path toward achieving individual goals while learning and growing.

A graduate of Alvernia University with a degree in Special Education, Leslie realized early on that she loved working with children placed in this type of classroom. "I loved getting to know the students and watching their successes; they made so many gains. Most of their child's lives, parents may have been told that they can't, or they won't be able to do something. It is wonderful being able to tell a parent, this is what your child is doing, look at this, every child can learn".

Children starting in kindergarten and first grade from throughout the district are transported to the MDS (multiple disabilities support) classroom located at the Lauers Park Elementary School, where Mrs. Esterly is ready to meet each student's specific needs head on at the beginning of every school year.

"My students come to my classroom with a wide variety of special needs. Some are working on learning how to be in school, some need help with feeding, or behavioral issues, some may be adjusting to sitting in a wheelchair, or learning how to communicate with no verbal skills and learning how to trust someone teaching them skills on how to function in their daily lives, and at school. So many questions pertaining to each student. Are they able to sit in a regular seat? Do they need a walker? Do they need different communication devices? We have students who have cognitive functioning well below grade level, or are medically fragile, with blindness or hearing difficulties."



Leslie Esterly: Placing children with multiple disabilities on a path to reaching their greatest potential

Written by: Phyllis J. McLaughlin

Leslie emphasizes that working as a team with parents, as well as the Reading School District Intervention Team to plan and support every child according to their needs, helps to give each student entering her classroom the optimal chance for experiencing success from day one.

Mrs. Esterly, as she is known throughout the district, begins her preparation in August, when she holds informal parent interviews to evaluate each new student. "We discuss any number of things that will help us to better understand their child. What are their

interests? Do they have allergies? Do they need help with feeding? Do they take small bites? Do they use any special devices for speech, and do they need assistance with them? Depending on the number of students who need one-to-one assistance, we assign aides or paras, and sometimes there will be a nurse with the student in the classroom."

The team pays much attention to the individual needs of the student before the school year gets underway, and Leslie has always made it her practice to have an open communication with families who are able to call her

after school or on the weekends if it is in the best interest of the student. "I have an open-door policy, and I make families feel so comfortable that they want to keep their students in my classroom."

Her work as a special education teacher overflows beyond the classroom and outside of the typical school calendar. Leslie has consistently taught summer school for students who benefit from the added support because of her sensitivity to keeping times of transition for these children consistent with what they are accustomed to in her classroom. Her willingness to go above and beyond for her students was evident during the covid pandemic when learning went virtual.

"We had a 5-year-old who would look at the computer screen and get sad; he just did not know what to do. I proposed that I would go out to students who were not adjusting to the virtual learning. It was completely volunteer, and I would mask, or wear a full suit, and we would meet on porches, sidewalks, and courtyards to continue learning during this time."

Leslie's love and her sensitivity toward the needs of her students resulted in a nomination for the 2024 Berks County Annie Sullivan Award which is presented to a professional who portrays exemplary care to students with disabilities, while going beyond the classroom to help those in the community. "I am an advocate. I love being the biggest cheerleader for my students every child deserves that!"

Leslie commends her fellow teachers in the district for their dedication to their students and the belief in their potential for success. "The heart is there with the teachers in the Reading School District. We are proud to be teachers, and we are proud of our kids!"

Passion & purpose: Inside Rosanna's Choice Café, a new downtown haven



Photo courtesy of Rosanna Martinez.

At the corner of resilience and revival in downtown Reading, tucked inside the lobby of a towering office building on North 5th Street, a quiet warmth awaits. It's not just the smell of fresh soup simmering or the soft hum of conversation. It's the feeling that you've stepped into someone's story—one built on faith, healing, and the courage to begin again.

That's the heart behind Rosanna's Choice Café, a cozy new gathering space created by Dominican-Turkish chef and owner Rosanna Martinez. Open Tuesday through Saturday, with Sundays reserved for private brunches and small events, the café offers more than coffee and light fare—it offers connection.

Every inch of the space tells a piece of Rosanna's journey. The walls are lined with artistic photographs—

many showing sunglasses, a motif that carries a deeper meaning.

"I was going through a toxic relationship. I didn't talk about it much, but it marked my heart," Rosanna shares. "The glasses? I wore them because my eyes were always puffy from crying. But one day I said, 'God, take the wheel.' That's when things started changing."

From that point forward, Rosanna poured her energy into creating a place not just for herself, but for others—especially women facing their own battles. "Mental health is a big problem, especially for women," she says. "We do a lot, and sometimes we just need a space to feel peace. I want people to feel like they're at home here."

EAT & DRINK

The name of the café—Rosanna's Choice—speaks to that turning point in her life, a declaration of reclaiming purpose and choosing joy.

Though her love for food began at home, Rosanna eventually formalized her culinary passion at Escoffier Culinary School. Before opening the café, she built a loyal following by creating charcuterie boards and offering private cooking services. That foundation of personal connection and artistic food presentation remains central to how she cooks today.

"I like to see color in my food, to smell the flavors, to watch people's faces light up when they taste something," she says. "That's what brings me joy."

Her current menu reflects both simplicity and soul. One early hit is her signature chicken lentil soup, which began as a quiet offering and quickly turned into a crowd favorite. Alongside it, her house-made lavender lemonade continues to draw regulars.



Rosanna is the first to say that she's still growing into her new space. With help from her daughter—who studied both business and art—she's fine-tuning the menu and the experience one day at a time.

"I'm not rushing. I want to see what people like, what they come back for. I'm adjusting, listening," she says. "I'm building something that lasts."

What remains unwavering is her commitment to creating a place where love, food, and faith come together. For Rosanna, prayer is her anchor, and her café is a reflection of that.

"My battles don't belong to me—they belong to God," she says. "This café, it's not just my business. It's my purpose."

Rosanna's Choice Café

60 North 5th Street, Reading, PA
Open Tuesday–Saturday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Sundays available for private brunches and events

Wanda Holdren: serving as a role model while raising the bar for aspiring young dancers

Written by: Phyllis J. McLaughlin

ARTS & CULTURE

At the age of 4 years old, Puerto Rican born dancer, Wanda Holdren began a journey that was a dream her grandmother had for her entire life, to become a professional dancer. When Wanda came to the United States from Coamo, Puerto Rico in 1990, she had years of training intensively Julie Mayoral Dance Academy and Victors Dance Studios. She arrived here with the enthusiasm and spirit to realize her own dreams while honoring those of her grandmother. Sadly, her grandmother passed away 3 years after Wanda arrived in her new life in Reading, Pa. Wanda became more determined than ever to reach her goals, and she focused on establishing herself as a dance instructor in the area.

With a large and growing Latino population in the Reading and Berks County area, she found fertile ground for finding students who were anxious to connect with the dances of their culture, and students of other cultures excited to learn and experience the thrill of Latin dance.

Established arts and cultural organizations learned of her talent and experience and opened their doors to her. "I called the Wyomissing Institute (presently known as the Yocum Institute) and gave them my resume and they were very interested because they never had a Latin dance instructor. I started with 15 to 20 students, teaching the basics of Latin dance," she explained.

Wanda had more inquiries to teach at other places. "I started working with the Hispanic Center, and at the same time I started working with the Community School of Music and the Arts in Centre Park, in Reading." The city locations

were easily accessible to students and in 2012 when the Community School moved the majority of its campus to the GoggleWorks, Wanda remained at the Centre Park campus, and began to expand upon her dance program with the Latin Flair Dance Team.

After several years, Wanda needed more space and searched for a studio of her own. "I rented a building on Kutztown Road and remodeled and decorated it as a bright and homey place for our dancers to call home." With room to expand her program further, WH Dance Academy offered classes for every age group, as well as classes in all types of Latin Dance.

"We have the Little Mambos ages 5 to 7, Latin Legacy ages 7 to 9, Little Fuegos ages 9 to 12, Diamond Team ages 12 to 14, and Divas 15 to 17. They learn everything; salsa, bachata, chacha, hip hop, jazz, flamenco, afro rumba, bomba, and plena. Students start taking classes until I see that they are ready to be part of the competition team. Competitions provide opportunities to travel to other places and to see how they rate against other dance teams. We've recently gone to compete in Miami, Connecticut, and Puerto Rico. Our dancers always bring home the winning trophies, we have a lot of trophies! We also have an annual showcase every year. This year it will be held on October 25th at the Miller Center."

With the expansion of the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts to the second former factory building, Wanda was encouraged to consider a move to the huge facility which would house her dance

programs amidst this active arts community. She decided to make the change and celebrated with an open house on August 9th. All classes will be conducted starting January 26, 2026 where she will occupy the entire third floor of the building. Events at the GoggleWorks are already in the planning stages for next year.

Wanda recently received an award from the World Salsa Congress, which marked an achievement that she has aspired to for her entire career as a dancer. "I have been part of the World Salsa Congress since 1996. I waited 35 years to received this prestigious award from my country. To be recognized as a teacher, dancer, and coach in my native culture was a great honor."

Wanda will continue to offer instruction which strives to meet the highest standards for students enrolled in her programs. "My students benefit from embracing their culture through dance, which helps them mentally and physically, gives them self-esteem and discipline while also learning to socialize."

The move to GoggleWorks will increase visibility to the public and spark many opportunities for the young dancers studying within a vibrant arts community. Check out their calendar of

events and class enrollment opportunities for all ages at whdanceacademy.com or by contacting 484-797-2944.

Outside of her dance studio, Wanda works in the pre and post recovery at the surgery center of the Reading Hospital. She loves spending time with her family that includes her partner, Felix Mateo, retired Reading Police officer, and their three children and one grandchild. When asked if there was time for anything else, she replied, "I enjoy reading the Bible and listening to Christian music in my free time."



From dangerous heights to careful precision: Josh Spudeno reflects on life in the tree service business



For more than two decades, Josh Spudeno, owner of Green Spider Tree Service, has made a living doing work most people wouldn't dream of attempting: climbing high into dangerous trees, working near live power lines, and dismantling massive limbs piece by piece. The job has left its mark — in the past four years alone, he's had bilateral elbow surgery, finger stitches, and more bumps, bruises, and close calls than he can count.

It's all part of life in the tree service business, one of the most dangerous trades in the country. But for Spudeno, the risks are worth it. He thrives on the challenge, the problem-solving, and the transformation that comes from taking down a hazardous tree or giving a sprawling maple a clean, healthy shape. "It's fun," he said. "You have to believe everything works out for a reason. And I love to see the end results of everything — the transformation from a dead tree to a yard full of life again."

Talk to Spudeno for more than a few minutes, and it becomes clear that

safety is central to everything he does. His crew uses helmets equipped with headsets to communicate, high-visibility shirts, and a strict set of safety checks before any cutting begins.

"We have helmets we communicate with each other in. We always have our safety gear on. We have high-vis T-shirts. We have safety checks where we don't work around certain people at certain points," he explained. "We use hand signals, and over time we've developed our own set of sign language for different tools and situations. There's a hand sign for a pole clip, for a hanger puller, for when a rope is ready to tension. Everyone knows exactly what it means."

When he started, safety communication wasn't nearly as organized. Language barriers sometimes complicated things, especially on bilingual crews. But experience — and a few close calls — made the importance of clear communication impossible to ignore.

Before starting his business, Spudeno spent time working around live electrical

lines with a utility contractor. That experience shaped the way he approaches tree work today.

"With power lines, you have one chance to do it right," he said. "There are no do-overs."

He remembers demonstrations from utility trainers showing just how dangerous electricity can be. In one example, a trainer pricked a lineman's glove with a pin, then picked up a hot dog with the glove and touched it to a live line. The hot dog instantly cooked from the inside out. "It was just crazy," he said.

Those lessons stuck with him. Today, whether working near a residential service drop or trimming around a home, Spudeno applies the same level of caution he learned in the utility world. "We rope things off, take them smaller, and use equipment whenever possible to avoid putting people in harm's way," he said. "If you can take the uncertainty out of a job, you do it."

Tree work is dangerous enough on a calm, sunny day. But after a storm, hazards multiply.

"Storm work is a totally different animal," Spudeno explained. "You've got high tension in the wires, trees twisted and hung up in ways you can't see from the ground. You have to assume that if something can go wrong, it will."

Cable lines, he noted, can hold an incredible amount of weight. Crews must tie down lines before cutting anything, and cutters often work within 10 to 15 feet of high-tension hazards. "When we do storm work, we have to make sure everything goes according to plan because you could die. Those are the most dangerous times in our business," he said.

Over the years, Spudeno has trained many young climbers and ground workers. He takes pride in knowing his trainees have gone on to run their own crews and businesses.

"It makes me proud to see them excelling now in the tree business," he said. "And the fact that there have been no major injuries among the people I've trained — that's huge. I'd rather put myself in danger than my crew. I do the hard stuff because I can see what's coming before it happens. I can set up ropes for a backup plan in case of failure. And I want them to learn how to do it right so they can pass it on."

To the untrained eye, tree service work might seem simple: show up, cut branches, load the truck. But the reality is far more complex.

His day begins with stretching — an important ritual after years of physically demanding work. After switching out vehicles and heading to the job site, the crew sets cones, safety signs, and speaks with the customer. Then comes the all-important job briefing, where the day's plan is reviewed.

"I've already done the estimate and walked the site," Spudeno said. "If it's a big, dangerous tree, I don't sleep well the night before. I'm lying there thinking through every step, how to make it safer."

Equipment selection and setup are critical. Climbers wear saddles and spurs — known as gaffs — for removals. Ropes are chosen for the job's demands: a heavy 5/8-inch line for large sections, lighter ropes for smaller cuts. A device called a porta-wrap controls the descent of heavy pieces, allowing even lighter crew members to lower massive logs with ease.



When a tree can't be dismantled safely by climbing alone, cranes come into play. Crane-assisted removals require precision and trust between the climber and operator.

In one job early in his career, a new crane operator misjudged the load, sending a cut section shooting upward. On another, the operator lifted an entire tree — roots and all — in one piece. Both incidents were reminders of how quickly things can turn dangerous when lifting thousands of pounds.

At 44, Spudeno knows he won't be climbing forever. His goal is to grow the business, hire more help, and eventually shift to a supervisory role. He dreams of spending winters doing tree work in warmer climates, perhaps on golf courses or at vacation properties, while expanding his residential work locally.

He also wants to create a TV show highlighting the culture of tree work, storm response, and the people who make it happen. "It's not just my business I want to promote — it's the whole tree culture," he said.

That creative streak isn't limited to the tree industry. Away from the chainsaws and wood chips, Spudeno has also stepped into the world of acting, appearing in a handful of independent films and television projects over the years. The work is different — trading harnesses and helmets for scripts and cameras — but it draws on the same skills he uses on the job: confidence, timing, and the ability to connect with an audience. It's another outlet for storytelling, just in a different medium.

And, perhaps most importantly, he wants to continue passing on the skills and safety practices that have kept him and his crews alive. "If you have the knowledge to save lives and do it the right way, don't keep it to yourself," he said. "Pass it on."

For Spudeno, whether he's on a movie set, in front of a camera talking about tree culture, or 50 feet in the air removing a massive oak limb, the mission is the same — to do the work with skill, respect, and heart, and to inspire the next generation to do the same.