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## Team Elmer's: People and Concrete

BY CYMBRE FOSTER

Jun 12, 2018



Todd Broad climbs into a Team Elmer's truck at their main facility.

Record-Eagle/Tessa Lighty



*Editor's note: This article was published in Grand Traverse Business magazine's Spring 2018 issue. For more stories from the magazine, click [here](#) to read GT Business in its entirety online.*

TRAVERSE CITY — Elmer's trucks have been rumbling along the highways and byways of Michigan for more than 50 years.

What started in 1956 with a dragline crane and a bulldozer has grown to a conglomerate housed in 14 locations across northern and mid-Michigan that provide heavy construction services.

“Think from the ground down — asphalt, excavation, concrete ready-mix supply, aggregate supply, trucking as well as specialized services like cranes, rigging, piers and piling services,” said Tonya Wildfong, who co-owns Team Elmer's with her two brothers, Troy and Todd Broad.

They are headquartered just south of Traverse City — just look for the big blue clock on the corner of U.S. 31 and Rennie School Road.

When Elmer's added several divisions in the late 1980s and early 1990s they decided they needed a name that would reflect the philosophy and multiple divisions of the company.

“Team Elmer's was the obvious choice,” Wildfong said. “It reflects our team concept — that no one succeeds alone. And it reflects our multiple divisions that work together to complete a project,” she said. Those four divisions include asphalt, concrete, excavation, and crane and rigging.

The backbone of the business and the key to Elmer's success over the decades is that they acknowledge the importance of people — those who they serve and those that they employ.

In the beginning

Elmer and Edna Schaub began Elmer's Crane and Dozer by digging conservation ponds. They ran it until 1977 when Elmer decided to retire and offered Russell “Butch” Broad the chance to buy it.

Back then, Broad worked for Peninsula Asphalt and was the foreman on a job on Airport Road near Logan's Landing. Elmer, who was driving by, skidded to a stop and suggested Broad buy his excavation company. At the time it included seven employees, four tandems, one loader, three dozers, two cranes, one lowboy and an annual income of \$275,000.

Broad went home that night, talked to his family. He bought the business and eventually expanded it across northern Michigan. His three kids bought it when he retired in 2009.

“Yes, it takes three people to fill his shoes,” Wildfong said.

The trio managed to keep the business rolling along, even though the country was in the middle of a recession.

“If you can run it through the next five years, you’ll be able to run it for as long as you want,” was Butch’s parting advice to them.

“Hard work, sacrifice, painful decisions, traveling farther for projects and an amazing crew with a service mentality got us through a time when many of those in our industry were closing or moving out of state,” Wildfong said.

## People Matter

Although there have been many changes over the years, what has remained static is the company’s mission: “People buy from people. Customers want a quality product for a fair price with exceptional service.”

Team Elmer’s has become a force in its field because of the firm belief that people matter.

“Your co-worker, the customer, the public, our project impact — they all matter,” Wildfong said. “Most flag persons on a job site will wave at as many vehicles as they can,” she said. “It’s a small gesture to recognize that we understand traffic delays are frustrating, we see you, and thanks for your patience.”

The owners say they also owe their success to 460 dedicated employees, including 41 women.

“Our success is due to every person that gets up early, braves the heat, cold, rain, ice, snow, grease, sand and then stays late until the project is done,” Wildfong said.

The three also are firm believers that the business is part of something bigger than just the work.

“We are building foundations for the hospitals that heal, the schools that teach, the roads that get families home safely, the driveways for the next chalk artist, basketball star or first-time bike rider,” Wildfong said.

In appreciation for their employee’s dedication, the company added a café (yes, it is open to the public) where they can get a hot and affordable meal.

“It’s hard to pull an 80 foot truck and trailer up to a drive-through window,” Wildfong joked.

In 2014 the company added a chaplain to the team. President Troy Broad asked Tom Shelder, an ordained minister and licensed marriage and family therapist, to come help any employees who might be struggling.

Shelder leads Dave Ramsey financial classes and travels to multiple job sites during the week, where he listens and offers support to employees.

“He’s a valuable resource for our company,” said Wildfong. “It’s hard to focus on safety when you are worried where you will place your parent who needs full-time care or struggle with a child with addition or are worried about a spouse with medical concerns.”

Wildfong also doesn’t hesitate to say that their crew is the very best there is.

“You can have as much equipment as you want, but without talented operators and great coworkers the equipment is useless,” she said.

It’s no easy task, for instance, to drive an 80-foot truck through Cherry Festival traffic safely, or to make sure a trench is at the correct elevation.

“We are truly humbled to watch all they can accomplish in one day, then another, then another,” Wildfong said. “The knowledge, the stamina, the concern, the pride they take doing a job well. It is a sight to see.”

### They are Hiring

Team Elmer’s is looking for team members and when they hire, prior experience is an advantage but not a requirement. They look for work ethic and a willingness to learn.

“A service mentality is helpful,” Wildfong said. “You may be serving your co-worker, or the client, or the public. In every aspect of our work, we’re serving someone.”

The Elmer’s crew doesn’t just serve the client; the business is deeply involved in helping the community both within the parameters of the business and outside its walls.

They support nonprofits like little league and 4-H at-risk youth camps to provide in-kind services for nonprofits. They also paint trucks to support breast cancer or pediatric cancer awareness.

### Looking Ahead

The majority of the company’s work is competitive-bid — with pressure to complete work on time, so that means always looking at the best way to innovate and use technology. It is also helpful that staffers are the consummate problem solvers and collaborators.

While all of that is significant, it is also important not to lose sight of the bigger picture, Wildfong said.

“Sometimes we will carry groceries for the elderly person whose driveway is blocked by our construction,” she said.

As the weather heats up, so do Team Elmer’s annual construction projects, so you’ll see even more of their signature blue-and-gray rigs rolling down the road.

Wildfong’s best advice when confronting the inevitable construction: “Eyes on the road and be prepared to stop. Take a breath, wave (with all five fingers) to the person working — and be safe out there!”

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Crooked Tree Arts Center -...

**Acc Air**

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