

## Cover Story

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## Motivated to Make It Better

*Ellen C. Wells*

### **Roses Inc. Green Country LLC**

**Location:** Broken Arrow, Oklahoma

**Established:** March 2013

**Size:** 3,200 sq.ft. retail area, 3,000 sq.ft. production greenhouse; small propagation house

**Employees:** 8 full-time and seasonal

**Specialize in:** All things roses

Travels that brought her to Russia, Israel and the Galapagos Islands by the age of 15. Schooling in France and Sweden. A modeling career. A studio arts major at New York University. None of these prepared Karen Gardner for the biggest challenge of her life: a debilitating stroke at the age of 21. How does one recover? What does one do after the river of a well-planned life rolls on without you?

With the help of her Master Gardener mother, the young Oklahoman found herself caring for roses. However, one could say it was Karen who was in the care of the roses, as the plants, despite their thorny attitude, aided not only in her physical and emotional recovery but also in finding her path in life.

The 2014 Red Fox/*Green Profit* Young Retailer Award winner talked about how roses have changed her life, the learning curve of starting a business at such a young age, and how love built Roses Inc. from the ground up, quite literally. Here's her story, in her own words.

### **On Getting Here**

Everything about my life from when I was a little girl has been an anomaly. I was blessed to grow up in a home where values were taught, education was stressed and where I was provided with opportunities to experience foreign cultures. After graduating from the International Bilingual School in Provence, France, I studied studio arts at New York University. To be honest, I chose art because I wanted to pursue something that I wasn't going to get burned out on. I'm high energy. I need a lot of stimuli, and I felt like even though I could have studied literature and linguistics, it would have eventually become boring.

Life has a funny way of intervening in our plans. While I was living in the fast lane and thriving in New York City,

that life came to a grinding halt when I suffered a debilitating stroke at age 21. Fast-paced New York lives by the law of “out of sight, out of mind.” I lost my internships, I lost my modeling career and I had to take a hiatus from NYU.

While I’m able today to share what I remember about my recovery, it’s impossible to express the experience. From an outsiders’ viewpoint I appeared as a normal, functioning young adult when in fact I was a shadow of the person I used to be. I was left with zero ability to emote and make decisions, which rendered me reliant upon my caretakers. I was forced to start from scratch.



## On Recovery, Roses and Family

Mom suggested I might enjoy toiling in the earth, and she knew a rose gardener who was looking for help. When I called the gardener, he asked if I could I carry 5 gal. buckets of water. I responded, “I am a 5-ft. 11-in. Germanic brawny chick, I think I can hack it.” He hired me the next day. We worked alongside each other and he taught me how to prune and care for roses. He had suffered a stroke several years earlier so he understood my silence. He would talk for me when I had no words. My health rebounded and my self-confidence returned. I began to rediscover my zest for life—not my former life, but a new determination to pursue something entrepreneurial, taking advantage of living in a community where I grew up: contacts, knowledge of the market, relationships with influential people and

being surrounded by family and friends.

As I regained my health, my mentor’s health declined. He was unable to physically run a nursery, so I stepped in to manage the business. I chose to place the arts degree on hold, since I was now a stakeholder in a business I didn’t wish to abandon. The fact was I had stumbled into a way to express my artistic passion—creating rose gardens. Drawing up the buy/sell agreement was a logical next step and really, it was a win-win.

That said, it’s not even the roses that drive my passion. It’s the motivation to make things better. There’s something about entrepreneurship, particularly within the horticulture industry, that meets my need for multiple sources of interest. Getting to work with my hands and really feel like I’m doing something, seeing that work come together and prosper months after, is the true payoff.

## On Connecting

[Stuart Barrett and I] met through a mutual friend, a mentor of both of ours through an entrepreneurial program we were accepted to. I was working on the business model for Roses Inc., which I hadn’t yet purchased, and over the course of the program Stuart opted to shelve his pursuits and join me in the development of the rose business. His proposal of marriage came a few months later, and is another story in itself—it only took one conversation about family values, and we just knew, “this is the one.”

Being full-time business partners adds a dimension of complexity to a relationship that demands communication, compromise and commitment. Every partnership requires these things, but a 24/7 relationship forges incredibly strong bonds that necessitate the need for space and individual growth. For

example, while he's tooling around in his shop I'm playing Just Dance on the Wii. Sometimes we opt to jam out together, him playing the guitar and me on my piano.



## On Stuart's Contributions

Stuart is the foreman of all the design/build operations for the nursery's 7.5 acres: Irrigation systems, electrical, build-out and remodel challenges, grounds and site planning are all his projects. He has a meticulous eye for detail and thrives on engineering challenges. It's probably attributed to his grandfather who owns Barrett Precision Engines. As a young boy Stuart worked beside him building engines, airplanes and automobiles. Stuart is a "measure-twice-cut-once" kind

of guy with any undertaking. He conceptualizes, researches, designs and implements, and that talent has translated into growing the garden design/build side of our business

Even though Stuart had never worked in the green industry before he took it upon himself to create a budget and piece out this amazing 3,000 sq.ft. greenhouse from scratch. Buying a pre-fabbed greenhouse and having one built was beyond our start-up budget, so Stuart built it by hand, from the engineering and infrastructure to the electrical system and even setting up the cool pads. He learned it and then built it. I'm still in awe that he was able to accomplish it all within six months of us being on this property.

## On Looking Long-Term

What's exciting to me is that just in the past month I've had two 15-year-old girls stop into the nursery knowing exactly what variety of rose they want, how it grows and so on. By the end of talking with them one even asked if she could get a job here next summer! I think that in my role working with the City, I want to encourage young people to pursue careers in the green industry and encourage girls in particular to tackle a non-traditional career path. I'd like to provide an opportunity for these teens to volunteer at the nursery, learn about caring for the roses, and determine whether it's a good fit for them—it's not for the faint-hearted!

My next endeavor is to create something like a "stitch and b\*tch" club at the nursery where we meet monthly, share gardening tips, talk roses and offer a place to store their gloves and clippers in order to cut fresh garden bouquets whenever they want to. We're also working toward something similar to "Gardenstock"—a music festival hosted by Illinois-based garden center Distinctive Gardens at their nursery in which the proceeds go toward a local therapeutic gardening program. Our festivals—"Prickles & Pollinators" and "Buds & Beats"—will be community gatherings to engage and celebrate local artists, small businesses, farmers, beekeepers and musicians.

My long-term goal is to eventually partner with an international company and act as a liaison between foreign and American hybridizers. To bring other aspects the world has to offer and to reintroduce some of the best roses from hybridizers such as the Guillot family would be a dream come true. Because I read, write and speak French fluently, I would start there, but I dream of visiting Bierkreek Rose Nursery in the Netherlands, Ludwig's Roses in South Africa and Viru Viraraghavan's farm in Kodaikanal, India.

## On Teamwork

Although my name is on the trophy, the Young Retailer Award is really the accomplishment of everyone working within Roses Inc. As the owner, I carry the vision and my teammates help make it a reality. Running a business like this, you can't be a one-man band. You can't put yourself higher than your coworkers ... in fact, you are working for them, trying to help them become all they can be. Having hired employees with a go-get-'em attitude and who want to learn about roses has been our greatest accomplishment. We have low turnover and have been able to recoup our investment in employee training. This is key to our future as we grow the business and provide career growth opportunities. It's our employees who reflect and represent our company to the public and to our customers.

## On Advice to Young Horticulture Entrepreneurs

Running a business requires intense focus. As the owner I need the intensity of a floodlight, and yet channel it into a laser beam. The challenge to balancing on the career-tightrope is to respect and seek out the wisdom of veterans in the industry while finding creative new ways to deliver value to your market. The safety net is a sound financial model sustaining you as you go because there will be some falls. Again because we're young, the world expects we will make some mistakes. Learn from them, laugh at them and appreciate those others who will laugh with you while buoying your spirits and encouraging you to go on!

I am very grateful to those industry professionals, customers, members of the area rose society who have willingly shared their knowledge with me and encourage me in my business. I feel very humbled to have been this award recipient but I recognize that past success is no guarantee for the future. I would say to other young entrepreneurs, embark upon your endeavor knowing it is only a path, not a paved road. Starting out, you are not going to be perfect or even up to the standard you strive for. You won't know what you're truly capable of until you make that courageous leap. Trust me, the rewards are incredible. **GP**