

## Cover Story

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## Finding Her Home

*Ellen C. Wells*



LOCATION: Centennial, Colorado

ESTABLISHED: 1982

SIZE: 1 acre nursery, 110,000 sq.ft. retail space

EMPLOYEES: Peak: 120 total; Offseason: 60

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In the tapestry of Lindsay Squires' life, a single thread can be found woven through, from which spring all of the enriching experiences informing her existence. That thread is caring for and developing community, whether that community be a small Nebraskan town, a coal-mining town in southwestern Romania or the people and partnerships associated with Colorado's Tagawa Gardens.

### Rooted in Service

Raised in a corn and soybean farming family in Nebraska, Lindsay grew up with a great appreciation for the values and work ethic that a life rooted in the soil gives. With her father's constant determination to assess and

improve each crop and her mother's and grandmother's ever-flowing energy and enthusiasm for what each day would hold, Lindsay seemed genetically predisposed to look for ways to support and serve. "It's an act of faith to put a seed in the ground and trust that it will grow and come to harvest," Lindsay says of her father's work, "but just the stewardship and discipline of carrying that farming year through and bringing a crop to harvest—it's really powerful." The metaphor in these words is powerful, too. Growing and nurturing a community and seeing it flourish—it takes the same depth of caring and commitment. Lindsay has farm life to thank for that.

A home-based education will instill that in a person, too. Lindsay explains that "[home schooling] has been a part of my story and very formative to who I am." The experience will also lead you to explore, to dream, to be curious and to journey. Lindsay raised mallard ducks and chickens, kept a "nature hut" in which she'd store her collections of seed pods and pressed grasses, examined and grew herbs and annuals and kept lists of favorite words and things she wanted to do in her life. Lindsay would even run with the wind, watching it move through the tall grass prairie. Talk about a curious nature.

### Building Community in Two Countries

Someone who watches how the wind moves grass is bound to go to college and have as her course of study something somewhat nonconformist. Writing and rhetoric with a minor in cultural studies was Lindsay's collegiate pursuit. And while that degree often leads to a career in journalism, speech and technical writing and even government, it instead led Lindsay to Romania. Since childhood, Lindsay says, Romania had "been on the map of my heart," so upon graduation she had eagerly grabbed an opportunity to become a long-term volunteer with a youth and community development organization there, working with children and youth.

She spent two years in Romania and used service learning and experiential education as tools to equip youth to become problem solvers and agents of change in their communities. "I loved that work," Lindsay says of her time in Romania. She also had the opportunity to start a ballet school—something that had been a big part of her early life—and used ballet as a tool for building trust, relationships and community. "I loved building relationships with the children but also with local Romanians in the community ... it's amazing to go from being a stranger to becoming Neighbor, Friend, Sister, Family."



Although she envisioned her life unfolding overseas, she found herself back in the United States. Lindsay felt she had left much of her heart in Romania, but journeyed forward to North Dakota, where she worked with children, and then eventually made her way to Colorado by way of her cousins' invitation. A one-month family visit turned into a six month stay, during which time she found her home. This is how Lindsay puts it:

"In that time I had decided I was going to dust off that list I made of all the different things I would like to do at some point in my life. There were well over 50 items on the list. One of the items was to work in a greenhouse and garden center. I thought, 'You know this could be just the perfect season for that.' I hadn't yet put down roots here in Colorado and I was still exploring. I ended up creating a list of six different garden centers in the Denver area. And the first garden center I visited was Tagawa Gardens. I remember walking through the door of the garden center and somehow just having a sense that I would work there."

And indeed she does. Lindsay was hired into a seasonal guest services position. But then amazingly, as Lindsay describes it, she "discovered this garden center and the Tagawa family had placed such priority in giving back to their community and investing in their guests that they had a community outreach department." How exciting for someone who wholeheartedly worked in community development in Romania! She then took on an additional role in Tagawa's events department. "To me it was just a stunning thing because somehow those pieces of my life that I thought I had left behind in Romania came back to me in such a unique and unexpected way," Lindsay says. "Here I was, in a garden center in Denver doing community development, building relationships and creating bridges between people and organizations. Being able to do that with such alignment with the ethos and values of the Tagawa family, with their integrity, with their generosity, their kindness, their compassion—that made the work so meaningful and made me feel that yes, this is a place and a people and a business in which I can wholeheartedly invest because they're doing this work from the inside out and really seeking to contribute and make a difference. That's always been what's most important to me."

## Managing with Grace

As Lindsay wholeheartedly invested herself into Tagawa Gardens, her efforts, accomplishments and simply her manner of working with others was recognized by the organization. She was brought onto the management team as Community Development Manager. She is selfless in her management style, wishing to bring out the best in her staff, which in turn brings out the best for the garden center and its community. "I am relationally driven," she says.

"I'm about seeing people and recognizing the intrinsic value and worth that they have ... That kind of perspective has really infused my work because again, whether it's Romania or a business in Colorado, relationship is always the heart of our work. It's the people who do this work. If we lose sight of the people, we really miss the meaning and the opportunity."

Lindsay's passion is to be able to create environments where people flourish. She believes that when the individuals and the team flourishes, the organization flourish, which in turn, allows the community to flourish. It's the developing of the internal culture that then enables the rest of the business—and the community—to fully express itself. And Lindsay's goal is to facilitate the success of the team and the team members. "Our team members are so brilliant and so capable," she says. "As I see their work and try to identify what obstacles are in their way, I ask, "What can I do to facilitate their success and help them shine in their capability, skill set and giftedness? That is what I really love doing."

It takes listening to accomplish that, Lindsay believes. "No matter what the season or situation, my role is to earnestly hear our staff—their ideas, concerns, hopes and fears—and to work together with them toward meaningful possibilities, solutions and changes. Their trust is our greatest asset."

## A Transformative Moment

Trusting and listening were key actions that helped businesses maneuver through this most uncertain of springs. The novel coronavirus laid waste to most plans, and garden centers had to pivot to survive. Prior to COVID-19, Lindsay and the events team would offer upwards of 130 to 150 classes, partner with local organizations to create family-friendly community events, and host annual traditions such as Night of Wine & Roses, Grey Kitty Pet Rescue Event, and Pumpkin Festival. All of that had to be put on hold for 2020.



For an industry that was galvanizing around the guest experience, Lindsay says, Tagawa Gardens and other garden centers were focused on how to create and enhance that experience. "That all really came to such a pause when COVID came on the scene," she says. "It's impossible to overstate just how much this event became this moment that has changed the trajectory of our businesses."

Out of necessity the industry's focus has gone from experience to convenience with online ordering and curbside pickup. Says Lindsay, "How can we continue to navigate forward? How can we adapt, pivot and truly offer services that conveniently and safely serve our guests? Everyone has a different comfort level. From the perspective of keeping a trust relationship with our guests, nurturing and maintaining that trust relationship, how do we meet our guests where they are, both through a safe and thoughtful in-store experience but also through some new avenues?"

One thing Lindsay does know for sure—there is no getting back to "normal," whether that's from a sales, service or programming perspective. "We need to have our focus set toward what we are becoming and taking this as a transformative moment for our businesses. Spring showed our relevance! So if we can just continue to translate that into multiple areas that connect with our guests, I think that will be really promising." The new strategies the industry has developed and is still developing are ones that must be integrated into our long-term business models, Lindsay believes, most especially during the shoulder seasons.

## Finding Home

Lindsay speaks of a time a few years ago when she began speaking at horticulture industry events on the topic of garden centers being seen as community centers, and how community development principles—principles that pertain just as much to suburban Denver as they do to Romania—can be applied to business. “In these moments, I felt that I was finding my home in our industry,” Lindsay says. “Daily business operations present untold challenges and complexities, but to keep from losing traction in the minutia, it is so important to me to keep alive a strong vision of why our shared work matters, how it betters the lives of real people and what it meaningfully creates in our communities.”

Welcome home, Lindsay. **GP**