



# A head start

Recipients say ONF scholarships helped launch their horticulture careers

Erika Willis grew up on the family farm, KG Farms Inc. in Woodburn, Oregon, so it's not surprising she decided on a career in horticulture. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

BY VIC PANICKUL

**T**he stories may differ, but there's a common theme among five former Oregon Nurseries Foundation scholarship winners that *Digger* magazine caught up with. They all grew up on farms or nurseries, and scholarships helped them get through college, get their degrees and gave their careers a jump start by enabling them to graduate with less reliance on borrowing.

ONF has given 609 scholarships since its beginning, totaling just over \$566,000. The stories of these five former scholarship winners provide an inspiration for the industry and reinforce the value of the ONF and contributions to the foundation from Oregon Association of Nurseries members and chapters.

**Erika Willis, 36**

Nursery sales agronomist, Wilbur-Ellis Co. Oregon State University, 2011, BS in Horticulture with a minor in Spanish

Willis grew up on the family farm, **KG Farms Inc.** in Woodburn, Oregon, so it's not surprising that she followed the family passion into horticulture. "My family started the nursery when we were really young and the nursery business grew as we got older," Willis said. "As a kid, I loved school. I loved math and science and was super involved in sports."

"I loved the nursery and the nursery industry and was intrigued by many aspects of it, so I decided to get my degree in horticulture at Oregon State University. I saw the realistic need for speaking Spanish, so I had a heavy emphasis on Spanish. I took all of the Spanish courses that I could and took two study-abroad programs, one to Spain and one to Mexico."

"My advice for young people is if you have an interest in travel and studying abroad, whether for the language or the experience, you have to find a way to make it happen," Willis said. "Have that experience. It's such a valuable experience." ➤



**OREGON  
NURSERIES  
FOUNDATION**

**Support the Oregon Nurseries Scholarship Program**

Your support and contributions help the students who will become the next generation of green industry professionals achieve their dreams. Scan the QR code to

donate online or contact Stephanie Collins at 503-582-2001 or **SCollins@OAN.org**.



## A head start

rience to have when you're young and you're forming your view of the world.”

Willis said the scholarship money she received helped her pay for school. Willis said she was able to use scholarships, including ONF scholarships, and savings to get through college without student loans.

“After school, I had no student loans to pay off and it allowed me to make money and save money from the get-go,” Willis said. It’s hard to put into words how significant it is to be 22 and have a fresh start instead of starting behind. It also made me feel so supported by the industry that I was going into, which was a great feeling.”

Willis worked for her family’s nursery on two separate stints, right out of college and before she started at **Wilbur-Ellis Company** in 2022. In between those stints, she was a high school Spanish teacher.

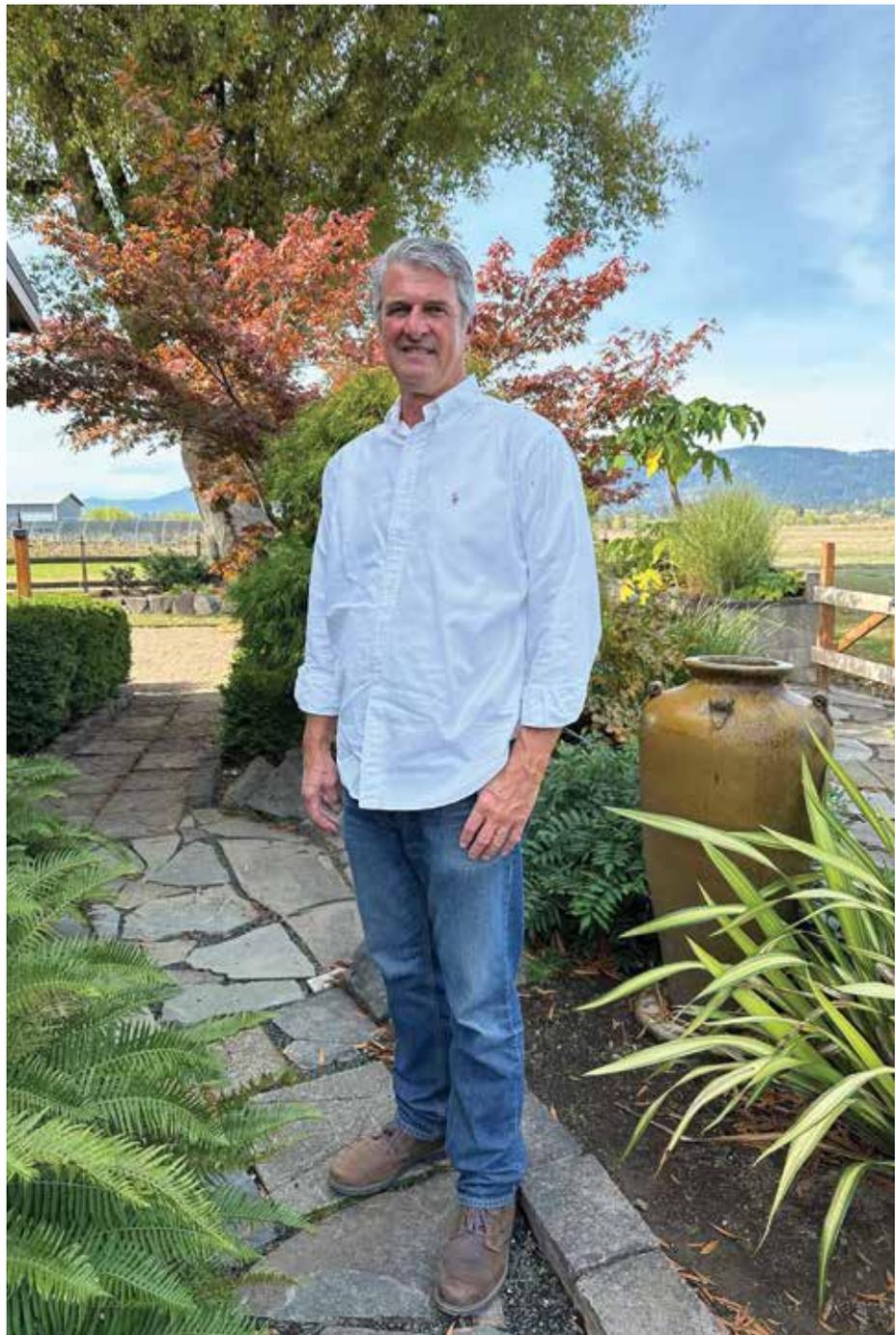
Looking ahead, Willis said she plans to continue growing in the job she’s in now at Wilbur-Ellis. “I love it,” she said. “I want to be working with more accounts. I feel like I’ve found the right spot for me in the industry. I work with people, with plants, with teams that support me. It’s really a wonderful job.”

For Willis, giving back to the industry is an important priority. “I am involved in the industry and in the OAN because it adds so much richness when you’re involved. You get to make connections and learn so many interesting things that help you understand the wider industry.”

### Lee Powell, 60

Lee Powell Designs, owner  
Louisiana State University, Bachelor of  
Landscaping, 1988

Growing up at **Garland Nursery** in Corvallis, Oregon, meant doing whatever his parents needed to have done at the nursery. “I learned about plants through osmosis,” Powell said “Watering, weeding, I think they paid me 50 cents a bucket for weeds at the time. I also grew up going to OAN conventions and the Farwest Show. I got to know a lot of the other kids — the nursery kids. And I still have some of



Lee Powell worked at his family’s nursery, Garland Nursery in Corvallis, Oregon, to help save money for college. PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE POWELL

those connections today.”

At OSU, Powell studied horticulture for a couple of years and took some landscape design classes and decided to pursue landscape architecture. “On the recommendation of an uncle who was a landscape architect, I applied to Louisiana State University and then transferred to LSU.”

As a kid, his parents instilled the value of putting yourself through school. “When I was in middle school, my parents told me that we were responsible for our own education. We had a great opportunity to make money working at the nursery and I

did save a decent amount of money. Then you start looking at everything that costs in college, so I started applying for scholarships as well. The ONF scholarship was very helpful in getting me through college. I worked at the nursery when I was at OSU and when I went to LSU, I worked at a retail nursery down there. I worked the entire time I was in college and any scholarship money was a huge help.”

Powell’s career path is a little different than most people going into horticulture or the nursery business. After graduating, he got a job with Bechtel, an engineering com-

pany founded in San Francisco, California, doing large-scale urban planning and landscape architecture. “I helped design 15 Bay Area Rapid Transit parking lots and plazas. I also traveled to Greece to work on their metro stations.”

Then, he and his wife Linda had their first child, and the allure of living and working in downtown San Francisco changed. “My parents offered us a chance to move back and be a part of the family business, which we decided might be a better spot to raise our kids. Coming back here, my goal was to be able to continue to work in landscape architecture and be involved in running the family business and that’s exactly what happened. I did both and I ended up using the things I learned in horticulture classes at OSU and my landscape architecture knowledge.”

One of the first things he did at the nursery was to redesign the layout of the

nursery. He continued to do both residential and commercial landscape architecture as well as the many functions of managing the nursery with his parents and two sisters.

Last year, the family sold the nursery. Powell continues to consult with the new owner when needed.

“One of the things I enjoy most about landscape design is working with people to help them create their visions for their yards and outdoor spaces — it’s very rewarding to me. It’s something that I can continue to do without abusing my body too much, too.”

His landscape design business has allowed him to come back full circle to his passion. “I can set my own schedule, take the jobs that I want — choosing to have time for myself and my wife when I need it.”

Powell’s advice is to find your passion. “Find an aspect of the industry that

you love and put your time and effort towards that. From my perspective, I really started to excel when I found my passion, which was landscape design.

“My wife Linda has been extremely supportive of coming back here to my family business and accompanying me on my long journey. It would be hard to imagine doing it without her.”

### Emily Iverson, 26

Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm, operations manager  
Oregon State University, BS in agriculture and food and business management, 2020

Not every kid gets to live in a house surrounded by tulip fields. Iverson did. “I had tulips outside my doorstep every four years,” she said. “I was working on the farm (**Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm**) doing tags and tulip pots, selling lemonade and working the market as soon as I was old enough. I worked the combine on the >>



## SAVE SOME GREEN ON ENERGY UPGRADES TO YOUR GREENHOUSE.

Energy Trust of Oregon offers businesses cash incentives to upgrade to more energy-efficient equipment, such as greenhouse covers, heating, insulation and greenhouse controls. We are happy to help answer questions anytime about how your business can qualify. Visit [EnergyTrust.org/greenhouse](https://EnergyTrust.org/greenhouse) to get started.



Serving customers of Portland General Electric, Pacific Power, NW Natural, Cascade Natural Gas and Avista.



Emily Iverson spent two years working at other nurseries before coming back home to work at the Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm in Woodburn, Oregon. One of those years, she worked for several Tulip farms across the country and in Australia, learning about their agritourism operations.

PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

grass, worked around the farm.”

During college, her spring terms were light, so she would come back to the farm and work the Wooden Shoe Tulip Festival in Woodburn, Oregon.

When it came time to go to college, Iverson chose Eastern Oregon University. “It was the cheapest in-state college, and I didn’t have to write a college essay,” Iverson said, laughing. “Also, they had good ag classes.” She later transferred to OSU and decided to get a business focus with the intention of going into the family business or another ag business.

Getting scholarships was essential for Iverson. “It was a vital piece of getting me out of college debt free. Being a farm kid, we didn’t have a lot. My mom instilled the value of an education in us. The only way to get through college was to get scholarships.”

“We have a family rule that to be a

future owner of the farm, we have to get a college degree and work off the farm for two years before we can come back. I spent the first year learning to farm at a hop and wine grape farm in Silverton. Then the second year, I realized that the tulip fest was ultimately what I wanted to do, so I spent the year travelling to four different states and to Australia to work at different tulip farms.”

“It opened my eyes,” Iverson said. “The first year was great. I learned how family business dynamics work. Not every family business is easy. The second year, I learned a lot about the economics of tourism and got a lot of different ideas from each place where I worked. They were all agritourism businesses.”

Iverson’s first year back on the farm was 2023. “The first year was a lot of learning, a lot of growth.” The last two

years her family likes to call her the “head honcho.” “When it comes to decisions on the tulip festival, it comes down to me,” she said. “I know the operation. What it involves is taking on more responsibility, as my family wants to retire.”

Iverson has been quick to make changes to improve the operation and revenue for the tulip festival. She’s implemented a timed ticketing entry system and online ticket sales. She handles bulb purchasing for the farm, vendor relations and hiring and staffing for the festival.

Her big push this year is Summer Flowers at Wooden Shoe. The event, in its second year, offers 30 acres of annual summer flowers with u-pick opportunities, photo ops, limited food vendors, wine tasting, coffee and local beer and cider. This year, she expects attendance of up to 20,000 people, compared to the 150,000

who usually attend the tulip festival.

“We started from nothing in the ’70s and started to grow tulips and in 1983–84 we started letting people visit. We started from ground zero and built it to what it is today. It took a lot of heart and soul from the family to get it to where it is today. I’m just lucky to enjoy it.”

“I see the farm focusing more on flowers and tourism in 5–10 years,” Iverson said. “Farming in this state isn’t easy.” The third generation is poised to gain ownership of the farm. “We’re going through succession planning now and I work with three other cousins who have their own roles.”

Even though the tulips are probably the most visible crop at the farm, they actually make up the smallest part of the farm in terms of acreage. “Our largest acreage is grass seed. About 10–11 acres is wine grapes and 40 acres is tulips. Out of 1,100 acres, tulips is just a small portion of that.”

But growing the Wooden Shoe Tulip Festival and Summer Flowers is vital to the future of the farm. “The agritourism part of the business is what makes the farming part of the business possible. It sustains our families, our workers, our business. Agritourism is the only reason I’m back on the farm. If we didn’t have the tulip festival, I wouldn’t be here.”

Iverson’s advice to the current crop of scholarship winners is to invest time and energy into the organization awarding the scholarship. “A lot of kids will take the money and run and don’t involve themselves with the organization, but you get so many opportunities involved, to network.”

#### **Bethany Rydmark, 41**

Bethany Rydmark :: Landscapes, owner University of Oregon, Bachelor of Landscape Architecture, 2006

Rydmark grew up on the family farm in Woodburn, Oregon. Her dad was a nurseryman who grew grass seed, Christmas trees and ornamental shade trees and owned Cascade Trees and Blue Sky Farm. “I grew up in the country working every summer on the farm,” she said. “The Farwest show was like my Halloween. >>

Chamaecyparis  
Sciadopitys  
Kalmia  
Thuja  
Picea



Rhododendron  
Boxwood  
Prunus  
Pieris  
Ilex

*Container and Field Grown Ornamentals*

Phone: 503-663-1200 • Fax: 503-663-5134

www.reardonnursery.com  
info@reardonnursery.com

10050 SE 282<sup>nd</sup> Ave  
Boring, OR 97009



## Looking for a health plan for your business, employees and family?

Providence Health Plan is proud to work with Leonard Adams Insurance to offer members of the Oregon Association of Nurseries access to quality, affordable healthcare.



Standard features available with our various health plans:

- Multiple plan offerings
- Preventive medications with a \$0 copay
- Chiropractic and acupuncture embedded for each member
- NEW for 2024: Option Advantage Plus plans offering a lab/x-ray benefit with the first \$500 fully covered



Additional member perks are available to cover other aspects of life, including:

- Personal health coaching
- Fitness center and workout video discounts
- Emergency travel assistance
- ID protection
- Savings on thousands of activities like movies, travel, or a night out on the town

Interested in learning more?

Visit [lacoinsurance.com](https://lacoinsurance.com) or contact Leonard Adams Insurance at **503-296-0077**, or toll-free at **866-907-1850**.



Bethany Rydmark got to see the plants that were specialty plants here, growing wild in the far corners of the world during her year off backpacking. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

I'd go get candy from every booth."

Even at a young age, Rydmark was a nerdy kid. "I didn't have rock star or movie star posters when I was a kid. I had tree posters from **J. Frank Schmidt (& Son Co.)** on my walls."

She subscribed to garden magazines as a young teen and she wrote to her favorite magazine editor, who ended up going to work at *Landscape Architecture* magazine. "That's how I discovered what landscape architecture was. I Googled it and realized that was my dream."

She spent the rest of her high school years preparing for that and went to the University of Oregon and studied landscape architecture.

The ONF scholarship was a huge financial help. "I worked in college at Lane Community College in Eugene and in the summers, I would come home and work on the farm. I'm very grateful my family also helped me pay for school. The scholar-

ships helped offset the costs of tuition and it was an affirmation from the industry, the community that I came out of. I received scholarships multiple years. It was touching that my aunt had been friends with Martin Holmason, whose memorial scholarship came to me. It was meaningful to receive funds in the name of someone my aunt remembered fondly."

After graduating, she got a job at landscape architecture firm Quatrefoil in Portland and spent six years with them. "I got my apprenticeship there and earned my license in 2010." After that, she quit to go backpack around the world for a year. "I joke that that was my graduate degree. I visited gardens and even went on a nursery tour in South Africa. Things that grow here as specialty items, I got to see growing wild in the corners of the world."

She came back in 2012 and started working for herself in 2013 by launching **Bethany Rydmark :: Landscapes**. The

business works mostly with private residents, legacy estates and some commercial work including Oregon wineries. The business is growing and recently moved into a new office space. It has five staff members now — all women.

"I really enjoy working with a thoughtful team that enjoys working with plants, and being an advocate for thoughtful methods for growing and design. I want to see us touching the world and making it more healthy."

### **Jessica Gonzalez, 30**

Living Habitats LLC, Landscape Designer and Horticulturist  
Oregon State University, BS in horticulture with a focus in ecological landscapes and urban forestry, 2017  
University of Oregon, Master of Landscape Architecture, 2022

Gonzalez grew up on a hazelnut farm in Junction City, Oregon. "I've always

# Nursery Guide

WHOLESALE PLANT SEARCH



# FIND



- Hundreds of Growers
- Thousands of Listings
- Millions of Plants

**Search** NurseryGuide.com  **and find it all!**

Enter Terms ...

- PLANTS
- COMPANIES
- SERVICES

SCAN TO ORDER YOUR  
**FREE PRINT COPY**

\*Must be qualified member of nursery industry



**PUBLISHED BY**



**OREGON**  
ASSOCIATION OF  
NURSERIES™



For Jessica Gonzalez, the Illinois Beach Shoreline Stabilization project was a favorite. It included creation of aquatic and avian habitat in Lake Michigan. PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA GONZALEZ

been surrounded by the Oregon agricultural industry,” Gonzalez said. “My grandfather had hay and cattle and my other grandpa had sheep. I worked at various nurseries in high school and all throughout college.”

“I was in the industry from when I was 16 to 24 so I did everything from retail to propagation. I was always interested in design, even when I was participating in FFA in high school. I was looking for a career shift, found landscape architecture, and applied to a master’s program. It’s the best of both worlds with design but still interacting with the nursery world I know. Landscape architecture allows me to connect people with plants and the outdoors.”

“Getting scholarships helped a lot, especially with the increasing cost of education. It gave me peace of mind knowing

that scholarships were out there in the various fields that I was interested in. One of the OAN scholarships was for my master’s degree and those are harder to find.”

After graduating from Oregon State, Gonzalez worked at **Bailey Nurseries** in Yamhill as a grower. “I did everything from plant health to tissue culture care. It was a little bit of everything and I learned a lot.”

After getting her master’s degree, she started working at Living Habitats LLC, a landscape architecture firm in Chicago.

“One of the reasons I was drawn to Living Habitats is that they were working on creating a local nursery for a project in California and I had the combined nursery experience and landscape architecture degree.”

She collaborated with the nursery manager and shared her expertise. “That was a big draw to this firm initially. I

think one of the great things is our ecological focus here: Aquatic habitat projects, various habitat projects, mostly focused on the use of native species.”

One of her favorite projects thus far has been the Illinois Beach Shoreline Stabilization project that included both the creation of aquatic and avian habitat in Lake Michigan.

Gonzalez’s advice is to continue to learn through all phases of school as well as your career. “It’s very important. I am learning every day on the job and continue to search for educational opportunities. Keeping that in mind is very important in your career.” ©

---

*Vic Panichkul is publications manager at the Oregon Association of Nurseries and managing editor and art director for Digger. Contact him at 503-582-2009 or*