

# A mighty MENTOR

*Bridget Behe strives to empower the next generation of horticultural professionals to be fearless and change paradigms within the industry.*

BY DANIELLE ERNEST

It is with great honor I write this article about an absolutely amazing horticultural giant who was my academic advisor and teacher at Michigan State University. Dr. Bridget Behe is the epitome of kindness and respect. She elevates her students to a whole new degree in academia. When we began the interview, she immediately wanted to talk about my life and circumstances outside the horticulture industry before herself. When I tried to push on, she wanted to know about two other events that had happened in my life, as I have been out of the horticulture industry for some time, but she follows me closely on social media. As Stephen Covey states in Bridget's favorite book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," "The most important ingredient we put into any relationship is not what we say or what we do, but what we are."

I asked her which question stood out on a list that I had emailed to her and she immediately gravitated to the question "describe a time when your students made you proud," not "name your biggest accomplishment." This in and of itself says a lot about her character.

As we spoke on the phone, I could hear her voice beam with pride as she spoke about her students. With all her travels around the United States and abroad, she would run into students at different trade shows and educational events where they would be joyous about their reunion and hug her immediately upon seeing her.

"Do you know how meaningful it is

that a previous student would make an effort to say hello and not run the other direction?" Bridget said with a chuckle. "Especially at Cultivate, I would see so many students and they would often share how I have helped them or guided them. It made me feel like I had a small hand in their success and makes me so proud of each of them."

Dr. Melinda Knuth, one of Bridget's former grad students and an assistant professor of Horticultural Science at NC State, had this to say about the "Beloved Behe":

"Bridget's contribution to my personal and professional life has been invaluable. Bridget guided me through much of my doctoral educational skill development by allowing me to take the reins on multiple projects and manuscripts, introducing me to her network connections, coaching me through job interviews and high stakes exams, and more. She invited me as a visiting scholar to Michigan State to collect data together. She has been a mentor, advisor, confidant and friend. I hope to be as good of a mentor to another woman as she has been to me. My life would not be as bright without you, Bridget."

Jessica DeGraaf, a former undergrad and grad student of Bridget's, and director of retail accounts for Proven Winners says Bridget's legacy of mentorship, especially to women, has been exceptionally impactful.

"Michelle Obama so eloquently stated, 'There's no magic to achievement. It's really about hard work, choices and persistence.' Dr. Behe truly exemplifies this statement.

Her passion, dedication and hard work are second to none. What truly sets her apart is not solely the body of her accomplishments, but her impact on thousands of students and the industry," Jessica says. "Her legacy far surpasses her achievements in the field of horticulture. She has graciously shared of her time and talents to mentor many women, myself included. Her impact and investment in my career have been monumental. She has been a sounding board, confidant and cheerleader, and I owe much of who I am as a person and professional to her."

Bridget epitomizes the term trailblazer. Throughout her career, she's worked tirelessly to bring another perspective and share critical research on connecting and truly engaging with the consumer. While new plants and propagation techniques are critical to success for growers and retailers in our industry, what truly matters is the connection point to the end consumer — what drives them and their purchase decision.

"For more than 30 years, Dr. Behe has brought this unique perspective and, along the way, has revolutionized how garden centers sell plants," Jessica says.

The eye-tracking studies Bridget and her team have undertaken have helped a lot of professionals, and not just in horticulture, understand how consumers choose a plant.

"We know much more about how they shop, the information they use to make a plant choice and what some key motivations are. I love investigating this



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## BRIDGET BEHE

key moment for the industry. It is the make-or-break moment for everyone. I'm thrilled to have contributed to making that moment better for buyers and sellers," Bridget says.

Her gaze-path research has identified ways to present point-of-sale information to consumers to encourage engagement and purchasing of plants, says Alicia Rihn, assistant professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Tennessee.

"Bridget is an amazing colleague, mentor and friend. She always advocates for the green industry to promote the positive components of their firms, whether it is the services, products or amazing people," Alicia says. "Additionally, she has been instrumental in guiding young industry and academic professionals as they determine their own career goals and aspirations. She is always available to talk, brainstorm and strategize about next steps to achieve personal and professional goals."

The green industry has been able to better understand and capitalize on consumer behavior, thanks to her efforts, says Dr. Charlie Hall, professor and Ellison Chair in the Department of Horticultural Sciences at Texas A&M University.

"She has been a pioneer in utilizing novel market research tools to ascertain the mind of the consumer — Servqual, conjoint analyses, experimental auctions, eye tracking — just to name a few. And she has passed on her skill set to numerous graduate students who have gone on to make a difference in the industry and academia in their own circles of influence. But perhaps the very best thing I can say about Bridget is she is my friend and one of my heroes. My life, and countless lives in the industry, have been enriched by her dedication to her craft, and her heart for knowing the unknown."

### A look back

Bridget loves science and, as a young girl, wanted to be a surgeon. In her undergraduate days, she saw her peers and "those students on a medical path who didn't seem to want to have a life, family or pursue anything other than medicine. That was my cue to find an alternative career path. Hor-



Current and former students say Bridget is a key role model and supporter of women in horticulture.

ticulture satisfied the scientist in me, and I could see myself with a career and a family," Bridget acknowledges. The daughter of a psychologist father and mother who was a nurse, she was discouraged from going into education. Yet, she felt teaching in higher education as a calling from God more than a deliberate career path.

"Everyone looks at a flower and smiles," she says. "We enrich people's lives with the products that we sell. We work in the best industry on earth."

Bridget was the first woman in her family to go to college. Her greatest mentors were her grandmothers, Esther M. Sheridan and Ann O. Behe as well as her mother Claire Jean Behe. Her parents and grandmothers taught her that "from the neck up, we are all the same, and with a solid education, you can achieve great success."

Both of Bridget's grandmothers were her horticultural inspirations. Her maternal grandmother (Esther M. Sheridan) was a tester for Jackson & Perkins roses. Esther loved her flower garden and created a beautiful one about ½ acre in size. She and Bridget would spend hours in the garden during Bridget's college breaks, talking about flowers and plants, and enjoying time together. Her paternal grandmother (Ann O. Behe) had an amazing vegetable garden and she and Bridget would spend some time talking about vegetables and enjoying the bounty. For Bridget, seeing horticulture from the edible and ornamental sides of the spectrum influenced her deeply. Her mother helped Bridget and her immediate family of five to earn 10 college degrees, but she didn't pursue one of her own, despite

the family's encouragement.

"Mom was an excellent editor and helped me, my brother and sister to become better writers. She often told me how proud of me she was and that fueled my determination to be successful in the classroom and in my work," she lovingly recalls.

If Bridget could give her younger self some advice, she'd tell her to "be more fearless and push back when people say or do inappropriate things."

### Bridging the gap

She got more serious about our conversation, sad at the lack of progress industry professionals have made in eliminating all types of discrimination in academia and industry. She's a proud supporter of the "Women in Horticulture" event that will take place for the third time this year at Cultivate. This massive event and several others are fantastic ways for students and new professionals to instantly connect with horticultural mentors and powerhouses, like Bridget.

"I first met Dr. Bridget Behe when she joined the Horticulture Department at Michigan State University. I was reaching the end of my graduate program at the time, so I unfortunately didn't have the opportunity to work directly with her as a student. But with her office just down the hall from mine, we crossed paths regularly and inevitably hit it off," recalls Leslie Halleck, horticulture consultant and owner of Halleck Horticultural. "She was always supportive and encouraging, and always willing to talk even though I technically wasn't one of her grad students. I still wish

I'd had the privilege of having her on my graduate committee. I left MSU in 1998, but in the years since, she and I have always stayed in touch, developing a growing bond rooted in professional respect and personal admiration. Her innovative and tech-savvy marketing research has provided valuable insights for retailers across the country. I consider Dr. Behe to be not only one of the smartest and dedicated horticulture industry professionals, but also a key role model for and supporter of women in horticulture. More importantly, I consider Bridget my friend and ally."

Megan Nace, senior manager of Education Program Development at AmericanHort, appreciates Bridget's gift of building people up.

"She should have a novel written about her and the amazing work she has done and is doing for her students, her community, and the horticulture industry. Dr. Behe is sincere and professional. She has an innate ability to take a small idea or thought and amplify it — and never takes credit for it, as she wants those around her to shine," Megan says. "She is honest and always looking for ways to build up those around her; whether it is the research/academic community, someone she just met or her students. Retailers, students, academia and the horticulture industry as a whole is beyond lucky to have such a true professional in our corner."

Bridget is a member of the Garden Retail Community Connector group and

supports the AmericanHort's work, especially in the retail sector. She has influenced many in our industry as she meets with the incoming HortScholar class each year and advocates for her students as they enter the green industry.

Bridget says the biggest challenge that our industry faces today isn't how to reach a younger demographic. It's how to keep the younger demographic working in our industry.

"Over my 33 years in the industry, I have seen smart, driven professionals leave the industry because the culture in several companies they worked for wasn't conducive to their growth. Our biggest hurdle as an industry is to become better individuals, evolve in our professional relationships, and understand that the words we use have power over people," she says. "The most important conversation each of us has is what we say to ourselves. We need to be fearless in our personal missions and coach ourselves to success. And if someone says or does something that makes you uncomfortable or you profoundly dislike, you need to speak up. If not, they think that was okay to do and you know they will do it again."

### Industry connections

"One of the best ways to educate our hearts is to look at our interactions with other people, because our relationships with others are fundamentally a reflection of our relationship with ourselves," Stephen Covey, Bridget's favorite author, writes in his book "First Things First."

Bridget makes it her personal mission to get to know her students and industry professionals — both from academia and the trade — and has developed longstanding relationships with industry pioneers.

"I have known Dr. Bridget Behe for well over 25 years, and in that time, I am honored to be considered a friend as well as an industry co-hort," says John Gaydos, director of product development and promotions at Proven Winners. "Proven Winners and I look to Bridget for guidance and counsel for all things related to new product development, product life cycles, product packaging, and consumer trends as they relate to marketing. She has had a steadfast focus on the products that we produce and the relationship of buying consumer with those products. She has always pursued consumer/product interaction with a keen eye toward the gardener's perceived value and how that relates to profitability for all that are involved with putting that product into the consumer's hands."

As Stephen Covey so eloquently stated, "Paradigms are powerful because they create the lens through which we see the world." Dr. Bridget Behe has created a powerful lens for us all to see the world and the horticulture industry differently than we did years, even months, ago.

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