

WEST MICHIGAN WOMAN

APRIL/MAY 2024

**NEW THIS
ISSUE!**

**WOMEN
BUSINESS
LEADERS
OF WEST
MICHIGAN**

Farah Nerhi

**HONORING HER ROOTS,
INSPIRING HOMES
AROUND THE WORLD**

**MANAGING
SOCIAL ANXIETY
WHEN YOU HAVE
TO BE SOCIAL**

**HAVING 'THAT'
CONVERSATION:
WILLS, TRUSTS
& ESTATE
PLANNING**

**TRAVEL AROUND
THE STATE FOR
THESE MICHIGAN
MUST-SEES**





Before the hustle and bustle of summer begins, spring is the perfect time to explore Pure Ludington. While it can be hard to predict when it will arrive or how long it will last, spring is a "secret" season to be enjoyed by all. Hit the trails by foot or by bike to explore nature's re-birth. Wander down a secluded stretch of shoreline or grab a bite to eat and a locally-made brew on a nearby patio. No matter what you're seeking - fun for the whole family, a beach or outdoor adventure, a peaceful get-away, or just a community of friendly faces - you can find it here.

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A row of vibrant red and pink tulips in blue planters is the central focus of the image. The tulips are in sharp focus, while the background, showing a city street with buildings and a blurred figure, is out of focus. The overall scene is bright and colorful, suggesting a pleasant outdoor setting.

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VOLUME 12, ISSUE 5

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Spring is one of my favorite times of year. The days get longer, the flowers start blooming and it feels like new beginnings! For many of us, we begin the cleansing process, whether it's organizing your closets, deep cleaning your home or detailing your car. Whatever is on your agenda this year, we have some tips to help you on page 10.

Spring is also Brilliance Awards season here at *West Michigan Woman*! With over 335 nominations, we were once again reminded of the amazing and talented women and men we have living right here in West Michigan. Narrowing down to our 2024 class of finalists was no easy task, but we're so excited to share the talent, expertise, commitment and drive of our finalists. If you haven't yet seen who they are, please visit westmichiganwoman.com/brilliance-awards and learn about each one! While there, you could even cast your vote for this year's People's Choice Award, open for voting through April 12! We also hope you'll join us on May 9 for the in-person Brilliance Awards event to honor and celebrate our finalists and their contributions to our community.

In 2020, through our Brilliance Awards program, *West Michigan Woman* was introduced to this issue's cover profile, Farah Merhi. As a Brilliant Entrepreneur finalist and People's Choice Award top honoree, we were treated to a glimpse into Farah's journey and success with "Inspire Me! Home Decor." Since, Farah has continued to grow her community while providing inspiration to home owners throughout the world with her products and partnerships. Farah's path has not been traditional, but she draws on the strength of those experiences, her family and the passion she has for her work. We've loved getting to know Farah better and know that her success will only continue to grow. To learn more, turn to page 14.

The road to entrepreneurship is certainly not easy, which is why this issue spotlights tips and thoughts from Farah and several more local entrepreneurs. Whether you're looking for advice on starting your business, mentorship or finding resources to assist you along the way, turn to pages 18 and 36 to learn from those who've achieved success as entrepreneurs themselves.

Lastly, we're pleased to have our first-ever Women Business Leaders section in the magazine (page 25). Being that we're a community that prioritizes supporting one another, our goal with this section is to further spotlight women business leaders doing great work. We're honored to provide a space to share this with our readers!

We hope you enjoy this issue and that we see you May 9 at the eighth annual *West Michigan Woman* Brilliance Awards!

Kasie J. Smith

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THE "BEST OF" found on westmichiganwoman.com

- » Ashley René Lee: Standing Up
- » The Next Chapter: Reflections on Living Five Years with Stage IV Cancer
- » Meeting the Community Where They Are: Wendy Falb, Ph.D.
- » Nurturing a Healthier You
- » I Am Intersex and I Am Here
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UNDERSTANDING BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a serious mental health condition. Individuals with BPD can have intense mood swings, trouble controlling their emotions, feelings of uncertainty about themselves and others that can lead to impulsiveness, unstable and/or intense relationships and trouble controlling their emotions.

Loving someone with BPD can be confusing, intense, and even painful. Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services Family & Friends class is a 4-session educational series designed to increase understanding of the illness and equip family and friends with tools for coping effectively.

Visit pinerest.org/bpd or call 616.222.3720 for more information and to register.

Ad on page 5.



95 YEARS OF TULIP TIME!

Tulip Time is celebrating 95 years! In honor of Tulip Time being the longest-running tulip festival in the world, there are a few new events to celebrate tulips, Dutch heritage, Holland today, and another Dutch icon—the bicycle!

Join Tulip Time for Pedals in the Park on Sunday, May 5 from 1-4 p.m. There will be a bike and helmet decorating station, a photo booth, and a runway show for the bicycles, complete with awards for the most creative, most outrageous and most Tulip Time-y.

Tulip Time will also celebrate by having several temporary bike sculptures placed around downtown Holland throughout the week of Tulip Time and a special commemorative statue placed downtown as the latest permanent fixture. See tuliptime.com.

Ad on the back cover.

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Ad on page 13.



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MANAGING SOCIAL ANXIETY WHEN YOU HAVE TO BE SOCIAL

Don't be so shy ... so unfriendly ... so weak ... these are just a few of the misperceptions that outsiders could have about people suffering from social anxiety. But, not only is it not that simple—and, thus, not just an easy fix—it also needn't carry such negative connotations. Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a legitimate mental health condition that deserves attention, as well as understanding and compassion.

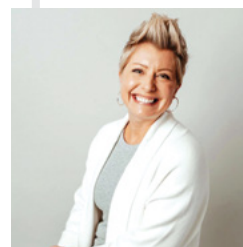
We're all faced with responsibilities that require us to be social, whether it's at work, with friends and family, or in activities that put us out in the world, like travel, errands, school and appointments. For some of us, these are just part of daily life; for others, even the idea of them brings on deep distress. In turn, that fear can impede our ability to function.

What's it like to have social anxiety? To be clear, it's more than simply the "blahs," or having a low-energy day where huddling under a blanket is preferred over going out and having to be "on." The distinctions, as described to us by Rachel VanBuskirk, LMSW, a mental health therapist at PortalPoint Counseling, are myriad.

Individuals living with SAD, she says, will likely notice that their uneasiness and worry around social situations are both intense and persistent; not just a passing feeling, but instead, lasting for months. Those with SAD may also have fears of being negatively judged or embarrassing themselves, especially when unfamiliar people or new situations are involved. They may become panicked or overwhelmed when speaking in front of others, as well, and have difficulty making eye contact or feel discomfort in being looked at. Physical sensations may also be present, including rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, stomach discomfort or nausea.

All of these difficult emotions and reactions can ultimately lead to outright avoidance, followed by noticeable, adverse effects on personal relationships, professional and/or academic performance and overall wellbeing. Self-doubt, self-criticism and negative self-image come into play here too, causing

FEATURED IN THIS ARTICLE:



**RACHEL
VANBUSKIRK,
LMSW**

*Mental Health Therapist,
PortalPoint Counseling*

Headshot ©
Abby Jayne Photography

further harm to the individual.

To make matters more complicated, those who have SAD are often misunderstood. VanBuskirk reminds us that while shyness and social anxiety do share some similarities, an important difference is that social anxiety is more powerful and more pervasive. “People with social anxiety are not just acting awkward or mean; the fear of judgment or negative interpretation can make them appear withdrawn or distant. It is important to recognize that this behavior is a result of their anxiety and that this person is not being rude,” she said.

SAD is also not a sign of weakness, she explained. It’s a legitimate mental health disorder that can affect anyone regardless of their strength or resiliency. So, the idea of just “bucking up and facing fears” might not be realistic, even though exposure therapy can be a facet of some treatments.

With all this in mind, how does a person know when to seek a diagnosis and support? If any of the concerns and behaviors mentioned above are striking a chord, it’s probably time to consult with a mental health professional. The right counselor can help those with SAD to cope with anxieties and fears, and manage symptoms as well. Keep in mind that an official diagnosis is not necessary to acknowledge that a person is suffering from social anxiety, but proper evaluation

can lead to more effective treatments, whether through cognitive behavior (CBT) and cognitive restructuring, medication or a combination of these.

VanBuskirk also notes that there are certain DIY practices for managing SAD that can partner with ongoing treatment. Relaxation techniques, such as short breathing exercises, can help when approaching an uncomfortable situation. Connecting with a support system to discuss shared struggles can also be helpful. Self-care and self-kindness are also tactics. Further, challenging negative thoughts and questioning their validity—and then replacing them with positive thoughts—can be empowering.

Most important, those with social anxiety should know they don’t have to simply endure it. The path to healing can come through education, patience and professional help. Counseling can provide a safe, judgment-free space to work out difficult feelings and fears—and find ways to overcome them. **WMW**

“People with social anxiety are not just acting awkward or mean; the **fear of judgment or negative interpretation** can make them appear withdrawn or distant.”



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ALLISON KAY BANNISTER has been a West Michigan resident since 1987 and a professional writer since 2002. A GVSU alumna, she launched her own freelance writing business in 2017. Allison is a cookie connoisseur, word nerd, aspiring gardener, and metastatic breast cancer thriver who loves traveling in Michigan and beyond, and enjoys art, world cuisine, wine, music, and making homemade preserves.

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IT'S TIME TO GET DEEP:

Deep Cleaning Your Home



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Spring is officially here, meaning that many of us are getting outside more and soaking up some much needed fresh air. We're also getting to work on some spring cleaning in our homes. And while this could include some usual tidying duties, spring cleaning is a great time to get down to the nitty gritty and do some deep cleaning ... you know, the gross stuff most of us put off until entirely necessary.

From supplies you'll need to the oft-forgotten parts of your home that need attention, we talk about it all. So throw your hair up, put on some old sweats and your favorite tunes and let's get to it.

FIRST, MAKE A CHECKLIST

Like many tasks, making a list of what needs to be accomplished can help organize your thoughts, determine the order in which they should be tackled and what supplies you're going to need.

NEXT, GATHER YOUR SUPPLIES

Take inventory of what supplies you've currently got on hand in order to avoid having to stop in the middle of cleaning for a store run. According to the American Cleaning Institute, some common supplies to have on hand include:

- » An **all-purpose spray cleaner** for small areas and an **all-purpose powder or liquid cleaner** ideal for surfaces like floors and walls.
- » An **abrasive cleanser**, helpful for stubborn soiled areas, and a **nonabrasive cleanser** for gentle cleaning on surfaces like porcelain sinks and ceramic tile.
- » **Chlorine bleach** (mold and mildew be gone!).

You'll also likely need glass and toilet bowl cleaning products, baking soda and white vinegar, along with a bucket, mop, rubber or latex gloves, sponges, a dedicated cleaning toothbrush, rags, duster, broom, dust pan, vacuum, scrub brushes and squeegee.

Of course, be sure to carefully read the labels on cleaning supplies and only use them on appropriate surfaces away from pets and children. It's not the time to play chemist, either. Ensure whatever space you're cleaning has proper ventilation and wear a mask, if necessary.



GET CLEANING

Now that you're stocked up on supplies, it's time to get started! While this list is far from exhaustive, here are a few essential deep cleaning tasks you'll want to make note of, in addition to your normal cleaning routine.

- » Wipe down the inside of the refrigerator and freezer.
- » Wash all baseboards and walls.
- » Scrub your entire bathroom and almost everything in it (tile, grout, showerhead, hardware, etc.)
- » Dust (from top to bottom) air vents and ceiling fans.
- » Launder window curtains and dusting any blinds.
- » Shampoo your carpet and rugs, or have them professionally cleaned.
- » Descale your coffee pot.
- » Clean the inside of your dishwasher, microwave and oven (to avoid a fire on self-clean mode, wipe out any food residue first).
- » Replace your furnace filter.
- » Clear outdoor gutters and spouts.

If you haven't already, spring also serves as a great time to test and/or replace batteries in your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, along with fire extinguishers, which have an approximate shelf life of 10 years.

GOT TOO MUCH STUFF?

Say it with me: *Get. Rid. Of. IT!* Depending on your space, decluttering might need to be the first task in your spring deep cleaning adventure. Thankfully, there are plenty of local organizations accepting a variety of home and clothing item donations that are clean and in good condition.

Remember: Deep cleaning doesn't have to be seen as a massive chore to be completed all in one day. Break it up by room, category ... or just whatever the heck you feel like doing that day! Simply lacking time or motivation? Call in the experts—JJ Organizational Design, Sparkle & Shine Cleaning Services, Clean Bee Home Services or Pinnacle Cleaning Services, to name a few. WMW



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SURVIVING A DROUGHT IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

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You fall in love, you commit to your partner, the future is bright. All you need is love, right? If I could insert the laughing emoji here, I'd insert loads. Anyone who's been in a long-term relationship knows that going the distance isn't easy. Sometimes, we can feel pretty isolated, even when we're partnered.

If your relationship has hit the "I don't feel connected to you" stage, you're not alone. But figuring out how to reconnect can be tough. Where do you even begin?

First of all, know that it's not unusual. "It's absolutely normal, and even expected, that couples will experience 'droughts' in their relationship," said Lindsey Zaskiewicz, LMSW, a psychotherapist with Mindful Counseling GR. She explained that changes in priorities, personal growth and daily stressors—like kids and work—can contribute to feelings of disconnection or distance from your partner.

Here are suggestions for navigating four areas in which couples commonly experience a disconnect or period of "drought."

Physical and sexual intimacy. When you're not rocking and

rolling in the bedroom like the "old days," the culprit might be stress, changes in libido, health issues or trust barriers. What's an amorous spouse to do? "A willingness to be vulnerable and communicate openly are imperative," said Zaskiewicz.

She explained that prolonged periods without intimacy, or an unwillingness to discuss the issues at hand, can lead to an emotional disconnect from which it's more difficult to recover. "Seeking therapy can provide a great deal of support."

Communication. It's old news that men and women—and even different personality types within the same sex—communicate differently. Even though it's a familiar refrain, the differences still cause issues in marriages. "A commitment to open, honest and respectful conversation can help promote partners feeling seen and heard within a relationship," said Zaskiewicz.

She suggested scheduling a weekly check-in time, free from technology and other distractions, to focus on and talk to one another in a safe space. "We live in a hustle culture and it's easy for time to just slip by. As inorganic as it might feel to say we

CREATE YOUR THERAPIST SHORT LIST

On *psychologytoday.com*, you can filter local and online therapists by specialty, insurance, gender and more.

CONVERSATION CARDS

A quick google search of “relationship conversation cards” brings up dozens of results. “These give you the opportunity to deepen robust conversation without having to think of questions on your own,” said Zaskiewicz.

need to ‘schedule’ time for us, sometimes that’s exactly what couples need to get the ball rolling,” Zaskiewicz said.

Quality time. Quality time and having shared interests often, but not always, go hand in hand. Oftentimes, couples who’ve been together awhile cultivate separate interests. Again, this is normal.

“We’re constantly evolving and you *should* have different interests as time goes on,” explained Zaskiewicz. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s OK if your partner doesn’t enjoy all the same things you do, as long as they respect that you enjoy it and create space for you to be able to do it.”

Instead of doing everything together, it’s important to be respectfully curious about our partner’s interests. “At the same time, identifying opportunities for new activities, prioritizing consistent time for connection and having a willingness to find common hobbies can help alleviate some of the strain,” Zaskiewicz said.

Emotional connection. There are many reasons couples who once stared at each other adoringly now feel a lack of emotional connection. Life gets busy, there are homes to manage, jobs to work and children to raise. Routines take over and feelings get left unsaid, which can lead to feeling distant.

“There are a variety of couples activities that can help foster increased emotional intimacy,” Zaskiewicz said, suggesting regularly scheduled check-ins, relationship-building conversation card games and therapy. She particularly recommended therapy for couples experiencing persistent emotional detachment, prolonged unresolved conflicts, or who are avoiding authentic communication.

If you’re feeling these types of disconnects, remember that periodic droughts are normal and don’t necessarily signal the end of your relationship.

“Every relationship is unique and there’s no one-size-fits-all solution,” said Zaskiewicz. “The fate of a relationship is dependent upon each person’s willingness to put in the necessary work, both as an individual and together as a couple.” **WMW**



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KIRSETIN MORELLO is a Michigan-based author, speaker, writer, travel-lover, wife and grateful mom of three boys. Read more about her at www.KirsetinMorello.com.



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FARAH MERHI

**HONORING HER ROOTS, INSPIRING
HOMES AROUND THE WORLD**



Photos © Kelly Braman Photography

Farah Merhi deeply understands the power of a warm, welcoming and comfortable home. Having been born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Africa to Lebanese parents who previously fled war-torn Lebanon in search of a better life, she knows what it's like to be forced to leave everything you know.

"When I was eight years old, there was a military coup which forced us to leave everything behind and flee DRC back to Lebanon," Merhi recalled. "We lost everything, leaving behind our belongings, cherished items like family photos, my dad's business, our home."

The following five years had a major impact on Merhi; she reconnected with her Lebanese roots, culture and traditions, and witnessed the women in her life take immense pride in their homes, placing love and care into and making guests feel at home through family gatherings, meals and personal touches. It came from the heart and resonated deeply with Merhi.

Upon returning to the DRC years later, Merhi's father rebuilt his business, and her mother designed a home their family could feel truly safe in.

"I remember coming home at the end of the school day, walking in and feeling so much coziness ... I felt safe," Merhi said. "I watched my mother find creative ways to add her special touch to every room, bringing it to life through the little details—and it's those little details that made the difference."

Thanks to her parent's many sacrifices, Merhi eventually moved to the U.S. for college and was determined to make her parents proud. She met and married her husband and had their children while studying political science, with initial intentions of pursuing a profession in law. Merhi came to realize, however, that her current career trajectory didn't feel right. Her heart was pulling her ambitions in another direction.

"How do I face the fact that I spent years and a lot of resources working toward a career I'd now realized I didn't love?" Merhi recalled asking herself. "Anyone looking in would've expected me to be happy. As fulfilled as I was in my personal life, something was missing."

She found herself without a plan.



"We get one life to live, and waking up **doing what I love every day** was important."

“With the support of my husband and family, I took a step back and gave myself a moment to dig deep to find my passion in life—I owed it to myself to refocus while learning to let go and allow myself to figure things out. We get one life to live, and waking up doing what I love every day was important.”

What Merhi didn't yet realize was how an upcoming home renovation project would light a spark that would grow to burn brighter than she could have imagined.

Every single aspect of their family's home remodel excited Merhi, with the designing and styling bringing her back to the love she saw her mother pour into their family home. With her creativity flowing, Merhi began documenting the process on Instagram in 2012 under the handle @inspire_me_home_decor. Since then, Merhi has gained a massive following online (7.9 million followers on her professional page; 7.1 million on her personal) and has built “Inspire Me! Home Decor” up into an internationally recognized design and home decor brand—her glam and elegance-centric style at the forefront.

“I wanted Inspire Me to be more than another Instagram account; I wanted it to be a platform that inspired home owners but also provided the tools to make their house a home—a product line,” Merhi explained. “I launched my own home decor and furniture collections in partnership with brands I'd worked with in the past, along with a home decor collection with QVC. As the years went by, I launched our website, inspiremehomedecor.com, where our customers can buy curated and handpicked home decor.”


Even through the extreme highs and inevitable challenging moments of her continued success, one thing has always been certain for Merhi:

Giving up has never been (nor will it ever be) an option.

Her upbringing has ensured that she moves through life with a different kind of gratitude and perspective.

“There's something about being an immigrant, witnessing war, fleeing the country you were born in and leaving everything behind that fills you with a drive and determination to do something with yourself and succeed,” Merhi said, adding that while it's natural to face obstacles in business, it's important not to take them personally. “I find hardships to be learning experiences and God's way of putting me on the right path again. It's all about perspective. Learn something from it and do something about it. I wish I'd realized this sooner in my entrepreneurial journey.”





“I find hardships to be learning experiences and God’s way of putting me on the right path again. **It’s all about perspective. Learn something from it and do something about it.** I wish I’d realized this sooner in my entrepreneurial journey.”

Merhi approaches her work with deep passion and a sense of gratefulness, all while being humbled by the opportunity to be able to build something for herself and her family.

When she’s not traveling for work and juggling being a mom, wife and running a business, Merhi loves spending time at home cooking, reading a book, working out or reconfiguring her own home.

“I’m an introvert!” Merhi shared. “It might be hard to believe with such a large social media presence and the nature of my business, but I love nothing more than to be home with my family and spending time with my kids. I also try to carve out some alone time for myself.”

Motivated by the positive messages she receives from customers, Merhi plans to continue focusing on the growth of her business and hopes to one day work with other women entrepreneurs.

“I understand the struggle of starting your own business and feeling lost,” she said. “There weren’t many resources for me to rely on when I started my journey. I’d like to work on that and hopefully make a difference for those on a similar entrepreneurial journey.”

Her advice to those aspiring entrepreneurs?

“There’s never the perfect time to pursue your dream—the time is now. Do what you’ve always wanted to do and don’t let fear of the unknown hold you back. Understand that you will fall. Pick yourself back up and keep going. Be your biggest cheerleader and most importantly, enjoy the journey. All of it.” **WMW**

8 QUESTIONS

with 8 ENTREPRENEURS



THE INS AND OUTS OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERSHIP

Many small business owners will tell you the road to successful entrepreneurship is hardly smooth. In addition to a solid business plan, it takes plenty of grit, strong self-belief, good mentors, resilience and an unwavering willingness to get back up when you've been knocked down.

While every entrepreneurial journey is different, we asked eight entrepreneurs eight different questions about their own successful small businesses to garner some insight to share with those who may be dreaming of starting their own business.

IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND GIVE YOURSELF ADVICE WHEN STARTING, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

"Trust your gut, and know that you can still keep going if your gut was wrong. There are definitely moments where we have to trust what our gut is telling us about a given crossroads—perhaps trusting a moment of company growth, a new hire, a new venture. And these moments can be very unsettling (especially if you are someone who likes to have a plan). So first and foremost, trust yourself and take the leap. You will regret it if you don't. However, it's just as important to know: it's also OK if you got it wrong. It doesn't mean that everything will come crashing down, and it doesn't mean that your gut won't ever be right again in the future. It certainly doesn't mean you should give up. It is OK to keep moving forward, knowing you tried something that didn't work as you had hoped."

- Jamie Carnes, Wedding Planner, Co-owner, Special Occasions

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES YOU'VE FACED IN RUNNING YOUR SMALL BUSINESS?

"I started InBooze in 2018 and just as I was starting to hit my stride for growth, COVID happened. It was definitely a blessing and a curse! I went from all of my in-person events and shows being canceled to going unexpectedly viral during the pandemic. It was amazing, but I also had such limited resources for produce, employees, packaging and even bubble mailers. Somehow, we made it work and now we have our own headquarters! I was able to build a kitchen and create a warehouse in 2020 from that crazy experience. Since we are handmade, we also face many challenges with scaling as quickly as the demand requires. I am very mindful of what I say 'yes' to!"

- Ashleigh Evans, Founder, InBooze Cocktail Kits

Continued on page 22 ...

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COMMUNITY CHOICE CREDIT UNION

Community Choice Credit Union was established in 1935 and in over nine decades has expanded its membership and impact throughout Michigan. With 24 member centers from West Michigan's Lakeshore to Southeastern Michigan, its more than 115,000 members include individuals, families and households, as well as business owners and entrepreneurs leading organizations of all sizes.

Locally, Community Choice has two member centers in Muskegon, one in Norton Shores and one in Holland. It also has member centers in Jackson and Hillsdale.

In recent years, Community Choice has enhanced its e-Banking and e-Pay features; added Credit Score by Savvy Money to give members free access to their full credit report; Targets, to help members save for future expenses; and Choice Map, to help members establish the financial freedom they seek. Digital Wallets also provide a level of safety for members making online purchases.

The GetBigReward\$ rewards program, which has paid out approximately \$28 million to members since 2013, is possible because of rewards earned through fee reimbursements, savings credits and loan interest rebates. Those rewards have been deposited directly into member accounts, including nearly \$3.35 million in 2023.



Since it was founded on the principle of neighbors helping neighbors, Community Choice will never charge a balance transfer fee for high-interest credit card balances.

Other examples of expanded member access include 24/7 ATMs, forthcoming interactive teller machines, self-service payment using interactive voice response (IVR) technology, direct access to more than 120 Credit Union National Association certified financial counselors at member centers and more.

Community Choice provides a full range of services designed to address both residential and business needs. As a full-service lender of the Small Business Association and other business loans, the credit union has approximately 6,500 business members.

We invite you to join us. Becoming a member online is easy by visiting communitychoice.com.



“We’re not selling products—**we’re solving problems and providing solutions.** You can only do that if you’re connected to and listening to your client.”

... continued from page 19.



HOW IMPORTANT IS **CUSTOMER FEEDBACK** TO HOW YOU RUN YOUR BUSINESS OPERATIONS?

“Customer feedback is critical to our success. So much so that ‘Clients Are Our Compass’ is one of our core values. If we’re not listening to and serving our clients, what are we doing? Getting to know them as intimately as possible is key. We want to know their needs, their direction, their trends, their pain points, what they’re forecasting, what keeps them up at night, etc. We’re not selling products—we’re solving problems and providing solutions. You can only do that if you’re connected to and listening to your client.”

- Karen Scarpino, President, CEO,
Promotional Impact & Green Giftz

HOW DO YOU **STAY INFORMED ABOUT INDUSTRY TRENDS** AND CHANGES?

“Staying informed on industry trends comes through active involvement, research, community engagement, conferences, and learning from industry peers and leaders. Engagement, critical thinking and being a part of the conversation is key.”

- Meredith Kent, MS, PAC, Master Injector, Clinical Educator, Owner, SkinCoLAB

WHAT **RESOURCES** HAVE BEEN ESPECIALLY HELPFUL IN YOUR SMALL BUSINESS JOURNEY?

“Personal connections with others in, or adjacent to, our industry. I am so grateful for the relationships I have with other business owners who would be viewed from the outside as competitors. I am blessed to know so many amazing people who I can reach out to with questions, requests for supplier or employee references, concerns, etc.”

- Kris Spaulding, President, Owner, Brewery Vivant and Broad Leaf Brewery & Spirits

Engagement, critical thinking and **being a part of the conversation** is key.”



Thank You.

Thank you for recognizing Mika Meyers PLC as a winner in the West Michigan Woman "Readers' Choice Awards" for our estate planning and divorce services and for selecting the firm as a finalist in the law firm category.

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Mika Meyers
Attorneys

DID YOU HAVE A **MENTOR**? IF SO, HOW DID YOU BECOME CONNECTED WITH THEM?

“My mentor came alongside me early on in my journey. I sent an email to a person I did not know well and asked for a call to learn about his journey as an entrepreneur. He took the call, gave me some advice and then I hit the ground running. I called him four months later and told him where I was with the business and he said, ‘You did it?’ He was shocked that I had actually acted on the business but more importantly, took his advice. We have been talking every week since.”

- Ashlea Souffrou, CMRP, CEO, Founder, SxanPro

WHAT CONSIDERATIONS SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN **SCALING A SMALL BUSINESS**?

“When scaling a business, owners must consider what size and scope of business they want to own. Do you want to know everyone’s name? Or sit in a corporate office in a different state? Any size or scope is right, if it’s right for you. All businesses don’t need to be the size and scale of Google or Tesla. But owners must know exactly what they want in order to convey targets, expectations and a vision to the rest of the company.”

- Laurel Romanella, Owner, Laurel & Co.; Certified EOS Implementer, EOS Worldwide; Co-Founder, Integrator, Entrepreneurial Leap

DO YOU HAVE ANY **ADVICE FOR ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS** BASED ON YOUR EXPERIENCES?

“Learn from as many people as possible—but stay true to your values and your vision. You’ll quickly notice how really smart people can all have contradicting advice. You have to stay committed to learning and growing your skills without losing sight of your goals for the business. Striking the balance takes a lot of intention.”

- Sarah Laman-Davis, Co-founder, Chief Impact & Sustainability Officer, Last Mile Cafe | **WMW**





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WEST MICHIGAN WOMAN

BUSINESS LEADERS ISSUE

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CAROL KENDRA *Chief Operating Officer*

FREDERIK MEIJER GARDENS & SCULPTURE PARK

Carol Kendra, the new Chief Operating Officer at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, is a proven leader in enhancing organizational excellence and community engagement. With a career dedicated to modernizing and elevating cultural and tourism sites, Kendra's expertise spans strategy, business development, marketing and more.

In her previous role, Kendra made significant contributions at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan, transforming it into a nationally recognized destination and spearheading its growth through innovative partnerships and marketing strategies. Her work has led to record-breaking attendance and revenue, alongside pioneering educational programs. Appointed as a Travel Commissioner for Michigan, Kendra has also made notable impacts in regional tourism.

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Kendra is an artist, gardener and travel enthusiast, demonstrating a strong commitment to community through initiatives like the Plymouth unFAIR, supporting emerging artists during the pandemic. At Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Kendra aims to leverage her vast experience and passion for the arts to continue to elevate the institution's guest experience, ensuring sustainability and growth.

meijergardens.org

MEGHAN STOREY

*Senior Vice President
and Regional Director of
Small Business Banking*

COMERICA BANK

When Comerica Bank announced in 2022 the transformation of its Retail Bank, one of core cogs that would drive the bank's future included the evolution of a more efficient, agile and connective small business banking team.

As those changes took shape, Comerica quickly tabbed veteran Meghan Storey who brought with her extensive experience and impactful leadership. Along with her ability to develop and mold the small business banking team in Comerica's Michigan Market, Storey also offered an unwavering passion to assist and uplift small business clients.

Storey understood the vital importance of identifying talent within Comerica and complementing those colleagues with valuable expertise from outside the bank. Developing, mentoring, empowering and assisting her staff remains on the top of her list in terms of her responsibilities as Regional Director.

Storey's leadership mirrors how the bank strives to succeed and raises expectations of what a bank could be in providing a high-class customer service, empowering colleagues to be bold and relentless, and serving communities to help them thrive.

Learn more about Comerica's small business banking products and services at [Comerica.com](https://www.comerica.com).



Photo © Comerica Bank

**LESLIE ROBERTS,
PH.D., LP, LPC**
CEO & Clinical Psychologist

WEST MICHIGAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Nestled along the Lakeshore lies a beacon of hope and healing—West Michigan Psychological Services. Leading this practice, with three locations and over 50 licensed providers, is Leslie Roberts, an experienced psychologist passionate about making a difference.

With over two decades of clinical experience, Dr. Roberts is more than just a psychologist—she is a dedicated advocate for mental wellness and a visionary entrepreneur. As a lifelong resident of West Michigan, her commitment to her community runs deep, driving her to provide the highest level of care to her clients.

Dr. Roberts' journey to founding WMPS during the height of the pandemic in 2020 is one of perseverance and dedication. A seeker of knowledge and continual growth, Dr. Roberts holds a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology with a specialization in Forensic Psychology. She prioritizes creating a warm and welcoming environment where clients feel heard, understood and supported on their healing and growth journey.

Join Dr. Roberts and the WMPS team as they continue to be a beacon of hope and help individuals heal from the inside out.

For more, visit wmips.net.

Photo © Rise Photography Co.

MONICA MITIDIERI

President & CEO

MONICA'S GOURMET COOKIES

In 1991, while confined to bed rest during a high-risk pregnancy, Monica Mitidieri had grand visions of owning her own cookie company. During this timeframe, her catering company was on pause, but after a healthy delivery, she found herself back in the kitchen. After dozens of batches made, and though hesitant to share, she added a new addition to the gourmet lunches she provided: a chocolate chip cookie.

Over time, requests for her cookies became so frequent that she bid a sweet farewell to her catering company and launched Monica's Gourmet Cookies.

It took Mitidieri years to duplicate each batch to perfection, but the fruits of her labor paid off. What once started as a one-woman show grew into an incredible team and drop-shipping 52 varieties of individually wrapped cookies across the globe.

Mitidieri's goal is to feed the world one cookie at a time. And while she'd like to sell one day, she's not done yet. With more exciting cookie news on the horizon, you can keep up to date by following Monica's Gourmet Cookies' social media accounts and newsletter.

monicasgourmet.com

2024 WOMEN BUSINESS LEADERS



Photo © Arrae Photography

BAKER HOLTZ CPAs AND ADVISORS

Where Women Can Thrive

Baker Holtz CPAs and Advisors understands that supporting women within the company offers both strategic growth and fosters a thriving environment for everyone. By actively supporting women, Baker Holtz taps into a broader pool of talent and fosters a wider range of perspectives that benefit the entire firm.

Sara Knoper, Senior Tax Manager, and Lauren Kurtz, Tax Manager, both recalled feeling especially supported by Baker Holtz when they became mothers.

“Baker Holtz has worked hard to understand the challenge of being a working mother and has done a great job of making the transition as smooth as possible,” Knoper shared.

Transitioning back to work after becoming a mother is uniquely challenging, and having a workplace that’s supportive can make all the difference. Baker Holtz offers a generous maternity leave policy, allowing time for bonding and recovery, along with flexible work arrangements. Options like remote work, flexible hours and part time schedules offer mothers the time and space to figure out how to best balance work and family demands.

“Working for a company that not only understands your dual role as a professional and a mother, but also celebrates it, is huge!” Kurtz added.

Baker Holtz empowers mothers to excel in their careers while embracing the joys and challenges of motherhood, creating a win-win situation for both parties. Melissa Seguin, Partner, shared another example of the firm’s genuine and tangible support.

“I feel the men in the office have a crucial role to play, especially in front of clients where unconscious bias can still show up,” Seguin stated.

Seguin recalled numerous times when clients have defaulted to looking toward the men in the room for answers to a question. Ryan Holtz and Steve Struck, the firm’s other partners, have spoken up in these instances.

“Ryan and Steve both do such a great job of making sure our voices are heard,” Seguin added.

Baker Holtz recognizes their responsibility to champion a culture that actively supports women, and by doing so, sets a positive example for others in the industry and encourages broader systemic change, paving the way for a brighter future.

bakerholtz.com

HAVING 'THAT' CONVERSATION:

Wills, Trusts & Estate Planning

Some common topics that come up during family discussions—like where to plan your next family vacation, memories from childhood or deciding who will host the next family dinner night—are typically light and breezy. On the flip side, however, conversations surrounding wills, trusts and estate planning likely aren't among those so easily had discussions. In fact, things have the potential to get pretty awkward and even contentious, especially if not approached with thought and intention.

To learn more about navigating having *that* conversation with family members, we tapped the expertise of Rose Coonen, Attorney at Coonen Law, PLLC.

DIFFICULT, YET NECESSARY

According to Coonen, talking about estate planning can be difficult for some families because it means talking about and facing their own mortality or addressing some areas of potential conflict within the family.

"If families can keep it in mind that the goal of planning is to take care of their families and that planning can actually avoid conflict, it can help get them started," Coonen explained. "It might be a difficult or awkward subject to talk about but once conversations happen, it can be a huge relief to loved ones to know that everything is taken care of and it can alleviate some anxiety and worries that a family might have in making a wrong decision."

Without having those conversations, Coonen says, a family may not know how best to care for a loved one if they become incapacitated or what their wishes are upon their death.

DISAGREEMENTS ARE POSSIBLE

So, how do you address potential conflicts or disagreements among family members? Don't let your feelings or resentment build up inside. Instead, lead with empathy, patience and focus your efforts on having measured calm, productive and open-minded conversations.

"When there is potential conflict or disagreement among family members, we want to start with conversations to see if we can resolve any disagreements," Coonen advised, noting that sometimes means having family meetings and laying out what the estate plan is to ensure the family knows and understands what will happen when their loved one passes away. "If this isn't possible or if there is a risk of potential conflict after someone passes away, we can address these family dynamics in the estate plan by spelling things out in clear and precise terms, addressing the potential conflict and hopefully reducing or eliminating any actual conflict or court battles."

OFFERING ENCOURAGEMENT AND TRANSPARENCY

When appropriate, grandparents, parents and relatives should be open with those set to inherit any assets about having their wishes met, in addition to being clear about who is inheriting what and how. Hiding any inheritances will likely cause emotional harm in the long run, not helping anyone involved.

If a family member doesn't have any type of will, trust or other

estate planning documents, gently encourage them to take the steps to create one and do your own research on what steps they'll need to take and any associated costs. You could even go through the process of establishing or updating your own documents alongside them, if it helps.

If you're met with a refusal, consider reminding them that having their affairs in order:

- » **Gives them the power.** Not only are family members able to establish their wishes, appoint an executor and name beneficiaries, they can also explicitly name who will not be one.
- » **Minimizes confusion and stress** for loved ones during what will likely be a highly emotional time.

While you cannot force anyone to have a will, having open discussions and listening to concerns is a great place to start.

STAYING UP TO DATE

Coonen emphasizes that any estate plan should be reviewed at least every two years, if not more often.

"If there are any marriages, divorces, births, deaths in the family or changes in assets, the plan should be reviewed to make sure it still does what they want it to do," Coonen said. "Periodically, laws will change so we want to make sure a plan stays up to date and aligned with the client's current wishes. Over time, we see that client's wishes change, especially with regard to who they want in charge of their estate or even with regard to their end of life wishes. Estate plans should be updated to reflect those changes."

Remember: Estate planning should be viewed as more than a one-and-done process. It may require guidance from trusted advisors, like Coonen, to ensure your plan works as it's supposed to, when it's supposed to. **WMW**



ROSE COONEN

Attorney,
Coonen Law, PLLC

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TRAVEL AROUND THE STATE FOR THESE MICHIGAN MUST-SEES

As Michiganders, we know well that our state can be counted amongst the most beautiful and exciting. That's all thanks to a bevy of natural wonders, a full four seasons, unmatched attractions and the people who make it all happen. Come along as we set off on a Michigan must-see journey, where we encourage you to be a tourist in your own state.

You can't talk about Michigan must-see destinations without talking about the Motor City. **Detroit** shines with a spirit and a vibrancy that's truly unique, and is absolutely brimming with opportunity to experience it all. Experience world class art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, home to the first Van Gogh painting to enter a U.S. museum collection; see aquatic life from the Great Lakes and all around the world at the Belle Isle Aquarium, the oldest in America; pay homage to the birthplace of Motown at the Motown Museum, which is undergoing a \$65 million expansion; and more. Be sure to also stop by Eastern Market (which is a prime tailgating spot during the Detroit Lions football season).

Venture to **Kalamazoo**, where those who enjoy sipping on a nice, cold craft beer and listening to live performances will feel right at home. Most of us will immediately (and rightly so) think of Bell's Brewery and its iconic seasonal Oberon beer when thinking of Kalamazoo. The brewery itself has much to offer beer lovers, along with being a great spot to catch a live show in its

Photos © (top) Pure Michigan / (bottom) Discover Kalamazoo





Eccentric Cafe and Beer Garden. More sudsy fun could be found at Kalamazoo Beer Exchange, in addition to family-friendly One Well Brewing and its Wizard's Pinball Palace. Car enthusiasts are in luck as well, thanks to nearby Gilmore Car Museum's collection of over 400 vintage and collector vehicles and motorcycles.

Of course, we can't forget one of Michigan's most stunning natural wonders, **Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore**. Located along the northeastern coast of Lake Michigan, Sleeping Bear Dunes offers visitors stunning sights along with opportunities for stargazing, SUP paddleboarding, morel mushroom hunting, camping and hiking 400 feet above the water along the popular Empire Bluff Trail. Just don't descend the dune unless you can climb all the way back up (or want to end up going viral on TikTok). Also worth visiting is the Sleeping Bear Point Coast Guard Station Maritime Museum and several area lighthouses.

People come from all over the world to experience the charm and idyllic nature of **Mackinac Island**, and it's not hard to see why. The car-free island is a Michigan gem offering visitors a chance to unplug and unwind. Popular activities include biking the 8.3-mile perimeter of the island; enjoying some fresh fudge; attending the annual Lilac Festival in June; strolling the Grand Hotel porch—the world's longest; taking a horse-drawn carriage tour to landmarks including Arch Rock and British Landing; dining at the Fort Mackinac Tea Room; and more.

Another natural marvel not to be missed is **Kitch-iti-kipi** or "The Big Spring," located in Manistique. The mesmerizing waters of Michigan's largest freshwater spring are a constant 45 degrees

and are crystal clear, allowing for an enchanting view of the many years-old branches and species of trout that dwell below. Rich in Ojibwe history, Kitch-iti-kipi can be best enjoyed via its observation deck and crank-propelled raft, complete with an overhead roof to reduce any sun glare.

With several milestone anniversaries in 2024, **Ludington** is a top option to add to your travels. Visitors could enjoy some stunning views after climbing Little Sable Point Lighthouse (celebrating 150 years) or the Ludington North Breakwater Light (celebrating 100 years) before roaming the area's stunning coastlines at Ludington State Park, which have recently been made more accessible thanks to the introduction of several beach mobility chairs and walkers. While visiting, be sure to enjoy the expanded Portside Garden area at Jamesport Brewing Company, sip a mimosa while shopping the contemporary women's styles found at The Hangar and grab a small-batch baked good from the Trail's End Baking Co. food truck. **WMW**



Photo © ToddandBradReed.com

MICHIGAN TREATS AND SOME PLACES WHERE YOU CAN FIND THEM:

Packzies (Hamtramck); **Pasties** (The U.P.); **Detroit-Style Pizza and Coney Dogs** (Detroit); **Mackinac Island Fudge** (Mackinac Island); **Delicious Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Cuisine** (Dearborn); **Cherries** (Traverse City); **Great Lakes Whitefish** (the lakes and any good dive bar worth its salt).

PAOLA MENDIVIL: SMALL BUSINESS RESOURCES AND MORE

As Business Development Officer for Grow and Vice President of Catering for award-winning El Granjero Mexican Grill, Paola Mendivil is passionate about assisting entrepreneurs in accessing responsible capital, finding resources and providing education to run a successful business. Mendivil's professional background offers a unique perspective on small business. We connected with her to learn more about what local entrepreneurs should know!



Photo © Isabel Media Studios

WHAT RESOURCES SHOULD ENTREPRENEURS KNOW ARE AVAILABLE TO THEM?

Several organizations offer tools, education, connections and capital to new and established entrepreneurs. Services range from business registration with the state to creating business plans and projections, to pitching prize-winning ideas. Grow's expert team recognizes a common barrier for entrepreneurs isn't necessarily a lack of information, but rather a lack of capital to launch or scale their business.

Grow is a Community Development Financial Institution offering accessible and responsible loans to individuals in nine counties of West Michigan. The primary focus of our work is to assist individuals who've been systematically excluded from obtaining traditional loans. Businesses need this capital to start or expand their businesses, purchase equipment, inventory, vehicles, or pay operating expenses. Approximately 65% of our portfolio consists of low-to-moderate-income households, female heads of households and BIPOC borrowers.

HOW CAN EXISTING BUSINESSES SUPPORT GROWING SMALL BUSINESSES?

Existing businesses can use resources, like their customer base and industry connections,

to help new businesses grow. They can also provide mentorship and guidance, share resources and provide access to capital. There are many networking opportunities where established businesses can provide industry insights and lessons learned to new ventures. The ecosystem is also intentional about investing in diverse businesses, so existing businesses shouldn't be afraid of reaching out to offer their products and services.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO SOMEONE FEELING OVERWHELMED WITH THEIR SMALL BUSINESS VENTURE?

Running a small business can be overwhelming, especially when juggling multiple responsibilities. Here are some encouraging tips:

1. Prioritize and delegate: Identify critical tasks and focus on those. Delegate non-essential tasks to others, if possible. Remember, you don't have to do everything yourself.

2. Break it down: Divide big goals into smaller, manageable steps. Tackling one step at a time can make the journey less daunting.

3. Seek support and accountability: Connect with other entrepreneurs, join local business groups or seek mentorship. Sharing and learning from others can be valuable because other entrepreneurs can

be experiencing the same challenges.

4. Self-care: Take care of yourself physically and mentally. Regular breaks, sufficient sleep, exercise and a healthy diet contribute to better decision-making and overall wellbeing.

5. Financial management: Keep a close eye on your finances. Many entrepreneurs are afraid to look at their numbers; budget wisely, track expenses and plan for contingencies before it's too late.

6. Learn and adapt: Be open to learning. Read or listen to books, attend workshops, or follow a podcast and stay updated on industry trends. Adaptability is key.

7. Celebrate small wins: Acknowledge your achievements, even the small ones. Celebrate progress and share with your circles to stay motivated.

Business ownership is often pictured as glamorous or luxurious. This can be possible after a period of hard work, strategy and innovation. Business ownership sometimes feels very lonely and intimidating; being transparent about one's needs to succeed can make the difference between reaching a lead, connection or sale, and not being able to launch at all. Sometimes imposter syndrome or self-doubt can dictate how we make decisions, but we should look at abundance strategy and know that the better we all do, the better our local economy. **WMW**

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VIP TOURS

New this year! Enjoy the very best of Tulip Time on this guided tour that makes stops at all the top spots. And you don't have to fight traffic!

FIDDLEFIRE

Tuesday, May 7

This family affair performs across a variety of genres with fiddles, guitar, bass, mandolin, percussion, clogging, humor, storytelling, and fun.



DANCING QUEEN: AN ABBA SALUTE

Saturday, May 4

The ultimate tribute to the music of the greatest pop band in history—sure to capture the hearts of fans and audiences of all ages!



SCOTTY McCREERY

Friday, May 10

Close your eyes and get lost in Scotty McCreery's soulful voice as he blends contemporary and traditional country in this unforgettable live experience.

