

Landscaping isn't just for men

Colby hopes to empower other professional women

By Lian Bunny
SUN STAFF REPORTER

West Seneca resident Jennifer Colby is a female business owner in a largely male-dominated industry. Her business Greenrock Property Services, which offers lawn moving, pressure washing, snowplowing and landscaping, was officially founded two years ago. What started out as helping out a neighbor recovering from surgery by mowing a lawn organically turned into a business. Colby said she's always loved working outside but didn't know there was such a large demand for people to do projects like landscaping and yard work. About 83% of landscaping businesses are owned by men, Forbes reported in 2019.

She started Greenrock Property Services with a few flyers, a pack of business cards and her little 21-inch push mower. Now, her business has a mix of residential and commercial clients, according to Colby. She added more equipment and services this year and hopes to expand further as she considers buying equipment to offer land-rolling services. Colby said she knows it's not common for a woman to get into the landscaping business, but this is what she loves to do.

While some women may like flowers, baking or sewing, Colby said she happens to get excited about chainsaws, plow trucks and commercial equipment. Now, she said she spends most of her time out in the field running her business and managing her crew, which consists of her husband Jim and an employee. "I hope it empowers other women and young girls to just do it," she



Contributed photo
Jennifer Colby, owner of local business Greenrock Property Services, also has a 10-year-old son Tyler and a chocolate lab named Lucy.

told The Sun. "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't start a business or lead a or manage a business. If you have a good idea for a business, believe in yourself, have confidence, put together a plan for it and don't be afraid to do it."

Colby, who has lived in West Seneca for about five years, also works a full-time job as a teacher's aide, is a hockey mom to her 10-year-old son Tyler and has a chocolate lab named Lucy.

She said her hope is to grow Greenrock Property Services to the

point where it's her main full-time job.

She also recently became a member of the West Seneca Chamber of Commerce.

"It's always exciting when a business joins the Chamber, especially a woman-owned business," said Joe Kirchmyer, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce. "We look forward to working with the Colbys to grow their business in West Seneca and beyond. Their energy and enthusiasm alone should take their business to great heights."

Orchard Park

Bussendorfer project awaiting DEC permits

Much of design for project already completed

By James Farrell
SUN STAFF REPORTER

The long-awaited Bussendorfer drainage project is hinging on permit approvals from the state's Department of Environmental Conservation.

Over the last several weeks, at Town Board work sessions, Town Engineer Wayne Bieler's update on the drainage improvement project has been largely the same: the department is just waiting for the go-ahead from the state DEC.

"We've done all the design, all the design except for the mitigation area and that crossing area," Bieler said at the last Town Board meeting. "So as long as they approve it, we'll be able to rock and roll really quickly with that."

Because the project would impact wetlands in the Bussendorfer Road area, the town needs to submit a wetland mitigation plan to the state agency, which must approve it. In the town's case, officials are proposing creating additional wetlands.

Bieler noted that the town has gone back and forth with the DEC several times discussing revisions but is still awaiting final approval.

"We should be at the final stages," he told The Sun on Monday. "They said basically that we should have it within the week

or so." The next steps in the project would be securing easements and then putting the project out to bid.

The Bussendorfer drainage project has been in the works for decades, as residents have for years complained that drainage in the area is not adequate.

The first phase of the project – building a retention basin – was completed in 2018. The second phase includes building the ditching and piping to guide excess water to that basin.

The project has faced delays over the years due to bureaucratic challenges like wetlands and easements and questions about funding.

Councilman Flynn returns to live meetings

Town Councilman Conor Flynn has been attending Town Board meetings via phone for the past several months as he was trying to limit his exposure to the public amid the pandemic given his proximity to vulnerable family members, including his wife who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer.

But he was able to attend last week's work session in person after announcing that his wife received full Covid-19 vaccination while he had received the first of two Covid-19 vaccine doses.

In a post on social media, he made a simple and straightforward statement: "I'm back."

Unemployment claim fraud on rise amid pandemic

By James Farrell
SUN STAFF REPORTER

On Feb. 23, a 55-year-old man from Orchard Park was informed by his employer that they'd been told of an unemployment claim filed in his name.

On the same day, a 57-year-old Orchard Park woman got a similar notification from her employer.

A few days later, a 70-year-old woman from Orchard Park received a letter from the state of Kentucky, notifying her that they'd received her unemployment claim there.

In total, 14 residents reported similar cases to the Orchard Park Police Department between Feb. 22 and Feb. 28. All of them had one thing in common: they were all victims of identity theft.

Unknown actors, using stolen personal information, had fraudulently filed the alleged unemployment claims in their names. And while last week's spike was notable, it's been a common story in the Orchard Park police reports, week after week, since the pandemic took hold last year. Identity thefts, centered on fake unemployment applications, are on the rise – not just in the Southtowns, but across the country.

Orchard Park Police Chief Joseph Wehrfritz suggested that residents frequently check with credit reporting agencies to make sure there's no suspicious activity

popping up on their credit. He also suggested residents consider placing credit freezes to ensure that nobody can use one's name to open an account or get a loan in one's name.

"With as many of these reports coming through it would be smart for people to start thinking about doing that," Wehrfritz said. "It creates a little bit more work on each individual's part but nobody wants to have their information out there and be used and the headaches it causes to straighten that out."

In Orchard Park, the number of identity thefts reported to the police department has more than tripled. Between March 1, 2019 and March 1, 2020, there were 43 cases of identity theft reported. But from March 1, 2020 to March 1, 2021, there were 137 cases.

That's including a recent spike in cases. From Jan. 1 to March 1, there were 58 cases. Of those, 38 happened in February alone – meaning that there were almost as many identity thefts in one month as there were in the entire last year.

Anecdotally, the West Seneca Police Department is reporting the same thing. Public Information Officer Rachel Kingston said that in recent weeks, the department has received anywhere between three and six calls about unemployment fraud claims per day.

Hamburg Police Chief Kevin Trask told The Sun his department has been seeing the same increase

in unemployment fraud reports. He said they are working with the state Attorney General's Office to investigate the origin of the uptick in claims.

It's not just in the Southtowns, or even in the state of New York, said Chelsea Binns, an assistant professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice who teaches courses on fraud and cyber crimes.

"Indeed, it's happening everywhere, all over the country," Binns said. "Tennessee, Florida, Oregon, California, Idaho, Ohio, the list goes on. All over the country. It's bad."

While many fraudulent claims are caught before any payments are issued, some are not. Fraudsters are netting anywhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per claim, Binn said.

The Labor Department's Inspector General's Office estimates that more than \$63 billion has been paid out improperly due to fraud or errors, according to the Associated Press. At least one security expert has guessed that \$200 billion has been lost to fraud.

The coronavirus pandemic figures as the major reason why, Binn said. Widespread economic hardship has led to an unprecedented number of unemployment claims. That, coupled with federal legislation aimed at streamlining the unemployment process, created an opportunity for fraudsters to file false claims into overwhelmed states without being noticed.

"Wherever there's an opportunity, fraudsters are going to take advantage of that," Binns said.

The consequences are far-reaching.

False claims that receive payoffs draw unemployment money away from people who truly need it, Binns said. That contributes to the overall cost to taxpayers. Other states attempt to fight off scams by creating waiting periods for benefit payouts, which results in the stalling of benefits to legitimate claimants in need.

And for individuals whose identities are stolen, they'll have to prove to the government that they never received any benefits. Otherwise, they may have to pay taxes on that.

"It can hit you personally out of pocket," Binns said. "You need to report it right away." Scammers are getting personal information from a variety of different avenues, Binn said. International organized crime rings often sell personal information on the dark web. Others might conduct phishing scams – for instance, sending a false message that falsely tricks the recipient into entering false information.

It's also possible that scammers might try to get the log-in information for already existing unemployment accounts in order to redirect those benefits.

Across the country, authorities are trying to get the word out to warn people about the potential of identity theft. Some states have

taken steps to fight it by instituting wait-periods or partnering with identity verification companies. New York announced last week that it would be using the security company ID.me to verify identities.

To protect yourself from unemployment fraud, Binns recommends that you change all your passwords regularly, do not share your birthday and Social Security number and frequently check your credit report for unauthorized activity. She also recommended staying off of public Wi-Fi networks.

If you receive a letter from the state Department of Labor informing you of an unemployment claim that you did not file, the West Seneca Police Department said that you should check the three credit-monitoring bureaus – Experian, TransUnion and Equifax. There, check your credit report and make sure no accounts or loans were opened in your name.

If suspicious accounts do appear on your credit report, you can dispute or report them as fraudulent by following steps on each website.

Even if you do not see fraudulent accounts in your credit report, the West Seneca Police Department strongly encourages you to place a fraud alert and freeze on your credit to protect yourself. Check your bank accounts and credit cards for suspicious transactions.

Victims should also call your local police department to file a report.

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