

# The Right Touch

*Minnick brings fresh perspective, strong leadership to this Virginia-based company.*

By Jim McConnell

Like the thousands of other ambitious twenty-somethings who graduated from college in May 2008, Andrea Minnick left the University of Mary Washington's cozy Fredericksburg, Virginia, campus confident that her degree would be the ticket to a successful, rewarding career. It wasn't long before her dreams crashed headlong into the harsh reality of life in a nationwide recession.

Minnick, who wasn't interested in augmenting her psychology degree by attending graduate school, entered a labor pool rapidly filling with veteran workers left unemployed by the economic downturn. Desperate to find work, she sent resumes to companies from D.C. to Roanoke, flooding the market in the hope that somebody would at least find her suitable for an interview.

One of her targets was Virginia Varsity Transfer, a Roanoke-based moving company. Minnick knew people who had enjoyed working for Virginia Varsity. She applied for an office position and met with the company's president, John Lugar, but didn't get the job.

Minnick's disappointment was short-lived, though. When Lugar's sister company, Virginia Varsity Self Storage, had an opening in October 2008 for a site manager at its Starkey Road facility, he remembered his interview with the personable brunette and decided to make her an offer.

"She just had 'it,'" Lugar recalled during a recent interview. "I was struck by her passion. She had a real ability to connect with people and I thought that would translate well to the storage side of our business. I knew I could teach her the business processes. To me, the whole thing is taking care of customers."

Minnick didn't exactly share Lugar's confidence. She had no experience and even less knowledge of the self storage industry, but she needed a job and decided to take a chance. Just three months later, Lugar promoted Minnick to operations manager, putting her in charge of all three of his company's self storage facilities. Last March, she was named general manager.

"I was incredibly flattered and completely terrified at the same time," Minnick said of her rapid ascent through Virginia Varsity's management hierarchy. "I had no idea what self storage was, but I tried to dive in headfirst. I guess they recognized my work ethic."

## The Changing Face of Storage

Minnick, who turned 30 in January, is part of two rapidly emerging trends. Formerly dominated by older men, the industry is getting younger and women are becoming increasingly involved in all levels of self storage operations.

"Baby Boomers run the industry now, but as many of them get ready to retire, we need to be ready for that," said Stacey Loflin, vice president of membership and marketing for the Self Storage Association. "We have to develop the next generation of leaders."

To that end, SSA formed the Young Leaders Group for direct members 40 years of age and younger who have expressed an interest in building a career in the storage industry. The group offers a number of opportunities for continuing education and socialization, including

networking receptions and seminars at the spring and fall conferences, professional development webinars, a quarterly newsletter and regular interaction through social media.

The Young Leaders Group had five members when it was launched in 2013. It now has more than 160 members, and

new people join every month. "Word of mouth is creating this buzz within the industry," said Loflin, who expects to have 200 YLG members by September. "It's the fastest growing segment of our membership."

Minnick recalled attending a SSA national conference earlier in her career, looking around the room and realizing that she was the only person under 40 years of age. That's no longer the case. She was thrilled to be one of more than 100 people who attended a YLG reception at the spring conference in Washington, D.C.

"It's so nice to talk to people who know self storage and want to talk about it," Minnick said. "We can exchange stories for hours."

It's not just idle talk. Interaction with YLG members who aren't direct competitors can have a practical benefit for young self storage managers by helping them think "outside the box" and stay current with new initiatives that have been implemented successfully in other parts of the country.

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~ Andrea Minnick

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“We always try to stay two steps ahead of the game in our local market,” Minnick added. “Getting to pick up different ideas and hear how other people do things is incredibly helpful. Sometimes you need a fresh pair of eyes.”

### A Taskmaster with People Skills

Minnick is now, in many ways, the public face of Virginia Varsity’s self storage business to residents of the Roanoke Valley. In addition to overseeing day-to-day operations at three busy facilities, she regularly represents the company at trade shows, events with local Realtor and apartment management associations, and a variety of civic and charitable functions.

She has come a long way in less than seven years—from a green 23-year-old who realized she had a lot to learn about effectively managing people, to a seasoned, savvy leader who has earned the respect of her employees.

Lugar described Minnick as “a taskmaster with people skills” and said he knows if he gives her a project, she won’t rest until it is completed to her satisfaction. “That’s what is amazing about Andrea: she has phenomenal people skills, but she’s also very OCD,” he added. “Usually people are either right-brained or left-brained; typically those are mutually exclusive traits. She has it all.”

Minnick came by her supervisory abilities naturally. As the oldest of three children, she grew up telling her siblings what to do on a daily basis. “I think if you asked them now, they’d say I’m a pretty bossy person,” she said with a laugh.

That didn’t prevent her from initially feeling overwhelmed by the breadth of her duties when she was promoted to manager of Virginia Varsity’s self storage operation. Being a young woman in a male-dominated field didn’t make that transition any easier, but she quickly learned the value of identifying subordinates with various areas of expertise and delegating responsibility to them.

Minnick credited her professional success to her employees, whom she called her “backbone,” and a supportive, “very strong mentor” in Lugar. “He’s been great about teaching me the business and always being there to help me if I have a problem,” she said.

On more than one occasion, Minnick has asked Lugar why he was willing to hire somebody so young and inexperienced and give her a leadership position in his company. He obviously saw something in her that she had never seen in herself.

“I don’t know if she was necessarily a ‘traditional’ hire, but we’re very fortunate to have her,” Lugar said. “We’ve done great things together.” ❖



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