

**Connie Thede**  
Success for  
a Small Town Girl

**C**onnie Thede (née Mucha) was born September 30, 1946 in the small Midwestern town of Muscatine, located on the Mighty Mississippi in the southeast corner of Iowa. She spent most of her life in the Muscatine area and now retired, continues to live nearby in Blue Grass, Iowa.

Connie has a strong work ethic, which she credits to the values she was taught by her parents. They were hard working individuals who raised four children on the salaries of a bartender and a part-time dress saleswoman and homemaker. With barely enough money to go around, Connie learned at a young age that if you wanted something that you needed to work for it. She started babysitting at the age of 11, worked as a car hop at a drive-in restaurant at 15, as a grocery store cashier at 16, and as a secretary in the high school office every afternoon after taking classes all morning. After school, she went to her cashier's job for another three hours and still worked her car hop job on weekends.

Connie married after high school and immediately started her family, but the marriage did not last. On her own with a child to care for, she went to work as a clerk in the Purchasing Department for HON Industries, a leading global office furniture manufacturer. She married again which only brought more heartache and divorce, but gave her two sons. She found herself with three children to raise with no support other than her own initiative. Her greatest ambition was to earn a college degree, but as a single mother there was neither time nor money to accomplish that goal. Self-educated throughout her career, she says learning comes easy. She has enjoyed soaking up as much knowledge and experience as she could from her co-workers, supervisors, and mentors through the years and eventually took several college courses including Business Law, Economics and Composition.

### First Steps on an Uphill Road

Her career in the utility industry began in May of 1969 when a close friend told her of an opening at Muscatine Municipal Electric and Water Company for a secretary in the Purchasing Department. It was during that job interview that she met her greatest mentor, Fred Lambert,



Connie on a trip to the Powder River Basin

who was the Purchasing Manager at the time. However, Connie recounts the actual interview with Fred as one of her worst experiences.

When she handed the application to Mr. Lambert, he looked it over, looked back at her, looked at it again and stated, "Young lady, you lied on this application." It was then that she wished the floor would just open up and swallow her. Very sheepishly, she replied, "I'm sorry you feel like that, Mr. Lambert, but I don't understand; I was very truthful on the application." He looked at her again and said, "There is no way that you weigh 160 pounds!" Immediately, he told her to take a letter and began to dictate in the same manner he spoke. He talked about some "bastard files" shipped to him that were deemed unsatisfactory, and he closed with the words, "That's a helluva way to treat a good customer." Connie was so stunned by the language that she couldn't type, and it was Fred Lambert who helped her through it. But in the end, she got the job.

Although it was only \$2.50 an hour, the salary was more than double what

she was making at HON, and she immediately agreed to take the job. The first two weeks were a struggle, but in the end

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it turned out to be one of the best decisions of her life. Fred became her greatest mentor and took the time to tell her everything he knew about the role of the Purchasing Department. He encouraged her to soak up all the knowledge she could, had her sit in on all of his meetings and conferences to take dictation, and continued to challenge her until his death ten years later. Just prior to

learning that Fred had terminal cancer, Connie made the decision to leave her job because there seemed to be little potential for advancement. Little did she know that change was coming.

### Opportunity Knocks on the Glass Ceiling

The utility was in the early phases of building a new generating station next to its older units just as a new generation of management began to give more promotional consideration to well-qualified women. Retirements and passings had

left a large experience gap in the purchasing area at a critical time. The utility had given temporary responsibility to a young buyer for the day-to-day procurements, but the new General Manager recognized that he had a large problem. He was more open-minded about women in the workplace and Connie's reputation with her previous co-workers and the other managers at the utility convinced him to call her back even though she had been gone nearly a year.

She was initially offered a position to work at the new generation station construction site; setting up site security, buying construction trailers, setting up and furnishing a first aid trailer, and everything that the project manager needed to begin construction. She also helped review construction documents with the project team and the consultants hired to design the plant. She enjoyed this job and it gave her first-hand experience with building and operating a coal-fired

generating station. Six months later, the GM offered her a huge promotion, a position managing all purchasing and inventory control for Muscatine. What a great opportunity for a small town girl, self taught with no degree, raising three children as a single mother. She spent the next 30 years doing a job that she loved and feeling very blessed for all the challenges along the way.

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positions all along the chain of command.

### Hard Work Rewarded

By 1990, Muscatine's fuel costs were soaring due to long term contracts guaranteeing coal and transportation that had been required by the bonding agencies at the time the new plant was built. In an all too familiar story in the industry, the coal supply agreement had been negotiated by a consulting firm and signed by employees who were no longer with the utility. It was handed to Connie to administer as a part of her new responsibilities and it immediately became apparent to her and utility management

that something needed to be done.

So began a long process of buying out contracts, constructing a rail unloading facility, and making a major fuel switch from Illinois Basin to Powder River Basin coal under new coal and railroad agreements. Modifications were made to the plants, the unloading



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facility was built in record time, and the utility realized a 60% reduction in its fuel costs. In spite of the years of hard work and expense, it was the right decision and the utility never looked back.

### Friendly Faces, Far-Off Places

Connie served as Muscatine Power and Water's representative to NCTA beginning in 1992. Attending NCTA conferences was a highlight of her travel. Networking with industry professionals and the up-to-date topics on every agenda made these trips a priority, even considering the minimal travel budgets at a small utility. Over the years she has gained insight into the industry's challenges and met a number of very good friends with whom she remains in contact, even after retirement. She was voted an Honorable Member at the Spring Conference in 2010 and continues to attend sessions whenever possible.

Energy Transportation Advisory Council) was developed shortly thereafter and it continues to include many NCTA members. In 2008, her term was over and she was honored by the Council and proudly displays letters, a wood plaque and acrylic tribute to her RSTAC service in her home office.

Connie retired from Muscatine Power & Water in 2009, after 40 years of service. She continues to stay involved in the industry through consulting with Maxeefish and Coal Pulse USA, focusing on the coal export business, which she finds fascinating. Connie is also working with a Canadian company, Dongara, which produces fuel pellets made from residential garbage. With 10,000 BTU/lb, 0% sulfur and little moisture, the pellets can be blended with coal to reduce emissions. Although consulting opportunities in the coal industry have declined over the past years, she still enjoys the challenge of searching for ways to stay involved.



Combining her love of Elvis with her love of themed parties!



A Thede Original Interior



Can you say pink party animal?

In 2001, Connie received an unexpected honor that would change her life. She was appointed by Linda Morgan, Chairwoman of the Surface Transportation Board (STB), to serve in Washington, D.C. as a member of the Rail Shipper's Transportation Advisory Council (RSTAC), a group established by Congress to advise the STB. The Council consisted of executives of large and small railroads and shippers across the US. They met at the STB quarterly to discuss challenges and issues facing the industry and to provide their opinions and input on resolving these matters as professionals, not merely as company representatives. Connie was the only party representing coal shippers. Connie was reappointed for a second term by Roger Nober, the new Chairman of the STB. During her RSTAC tenure, she was appointed as an Officer of the Council serving as Secretary, Treasurer and two years as the Chair. Connie always liked to share her work on RSTAC with the members of NCTA. In 2007, Connie and then Chairman Nottingham discussed a recommendation that the STB should form an advisory group with a focus on energy. RETAC (Rail

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### Friends and Family

Family has always been extremely important to Connie. She will tell you she has been blessed to have been married to her soul mate, Jim, for over 27 years. She knew the first time she saw him that she would marry him even though she didn't even know his name. They have five children between them, ten grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. She has always been considered the family "rock" since she is constantly there to support them in many different ways. Holidays are normally celebrated at Connie's home and include numbers from 35-50 family members and close friends.

She loves people and considers herself a real "party animal". She has held many theme party events throughout the years and enjoys planning parties and watching all her guests have a good time. She has been told she should become a party planner in her retirement but she quickly responds that "she doesn't want to work that hard anymore."

Connie's family history is haunted by the specter of breast cancer. Her mother was first affected at age 33, then again

at 45, only to succumb to the disease at age 48. Her younger sister also passed away from breast cancer at the young age of 43. In addition, she lost three aunts over the years to cancer, and in 2006, her twenty year old granddaughter began a battle with ovarian cancer. She is now a five year survivor. In 2007, Connie herself fell prey to this "monster who has always been lurking in the closet," as she refers to it, but her determination to fight was as strong as ever. She underwent surgeries and chemotherapy; however, that "monster" was not completely gone. In 2008 while preparing for reconstruction surgery, her surgeon discovered a large freckle on her shoulder. He did a biopsy and discovered it was in fact a large melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. After a horrible surgery involving tissue removal and skin grafts, she was once again on the road to recovery, and remains cancer free to this day.

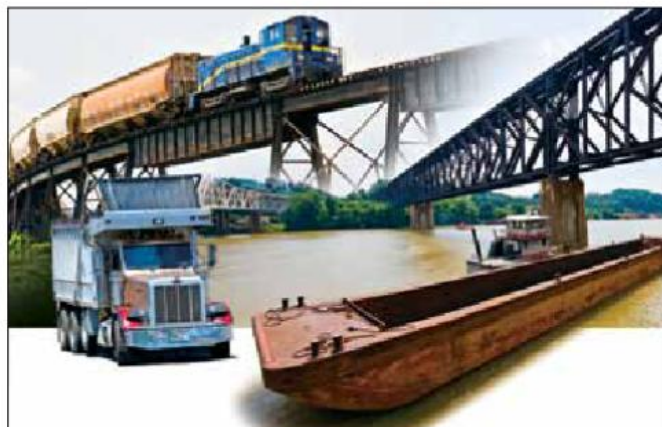
During the years when she struggled to support her three



Connie with John Felty at the NCTA Golf event at the Broadmoor in 2011

children Connie took on an interesting new business. Working with her brother and using sewing skills she was taught by her grandmother, a professional slip cover maker, she purchased an industrial sewing machine and taught herself how to do custom interiors and upholstery for show trucks and custom vans. Her meticulous work was rewarded with many repeat customers and by her brother's vehicles many first place showings. Her brother was her hardest customer. Everything had to be perfect on his vehicles – he counted stitches per inch and if it wasn't exact, Connie had to redo it. In one case she did 6 sets of sun-visors before getting a perfect set. One of his trucks had an interior with over 3,000 covered buttons. She did three complete interiors for him (free gratis of course) and his vehicles always won first place at the car shows he entered. Although a fun diversion, she did all this work late at night after a long day at the utility, after the kids were fed and put to bed and on weekends. After a few years she decided to give it up and sold her machine before her brother or another one of her satisfied customers wanted to change their interior yet again.

She also fed her creative side with an avid interest in crafting. Again she bought numerous books and videos and taught herself flower arranging, wreath making, jewelry making, T-shirts and sweatshirt design, gift basket creation, and every other conceivable craft – even one step painting. She has a



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large craft room in her lower level filled with enough supplies to open a craft store. She is now passing along many of those creative projects to her daughters and grandchildren.

### Fun and Games

Connie loves to play golf although she doesn't think she's very good at it, joking that it makes sense with her background that she go to a golf course and get the most swings for her money. Nonetheless, what she enjoys most about golf is the outdoors and the people she gets to play with, especially at the NCTA events. Connie also readily admits that she loves to gamble. She and her husband, Jim, love to go to the local casino and sit for hours playing video poker to relieve stress. Although rarely a profitable pastime, it keeps them entertained. When they travel, they prefer to drive so they can plan their route around casinos in the areas to try to hit as many along the way as they can.

Finally, Connie loves music and



Connie Thede

dancing. She and her brother won every dance contest they entered in high school, practicing all of the 50's and 60's dances every night until they were totally in sync. Dancing is still a passion so she never misses an opportunity, although it is sometimes a struggle to get

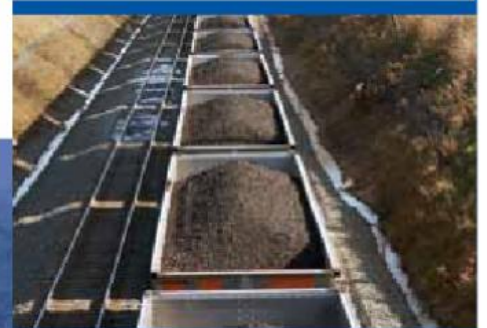
Jim on the dance floor with her.

One challenge that is on her bucket list is to learn to play the guitar. She bought a guitar two years ago, has the books and videos, but has yet to learn to play a song. Seems like there just is no time now that she is retired to teach herself yet, but she is still determined to master this feat.

She is a huge Elvis fan and believes that she has been guided through her life by his version of the song, "My Way". The conventional way of living has never really appealed to Connie. Her education, her career, her faith, her family, and her struggle for life have always been handled "her way". It has been a life of just about every challenge imaginable, but each step made her stronger and more determined to succeed. Her friends, family and colleagues have told her for years no one would believe all of the things that she's encountered – "You should write a book," they say. Perhaps that, too, should be added to her bucket list. ▲

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