

# Helping a Small Town Thrive

*Entrepreneurial couple strives to 'make things happen' in Goldendale*

By Jeanie Senior

When the Burgess family—Lila, Gary and their four children—moved to Klickitat County from western Washington more than 12 years ago, they found friendly merchants, a beautiful setting and “people who remembered who you were, where you didn’t have to

wait in line for an hour,” Lila says. “I was relieved to be out of Pierce County. We never looked back.”

Gary started Burgess Construction, they added two foster children to their family and Lila was a stay-at-home mom.

“I raised the kids, had fun gardening, played around with farm life,” she says.

Lila has watched the local economy down shift following the shutdown of Goldendale Aluminum more than a decade ago. Believing “you can’t really complain unless you get involved,” she has attended meetings and tried to stay on top of economic development efforts.

In May 2011, Lila created a Facebook page called Reimagine Goldendale, aimed at fostering discussion and involvement.

“City life isn’t for everyone,” she wrote. “Goldendale is a fantastic little town, with a lot of potential.”

The social media page asks people for their thoughts about opportunities, employment, education, and recreational and social activities. The page also notes local events.

“I was hoping it would be an easy way to network without going to a lot of meetings,” Lila says.

Lila posts links to articles and websites that might elicit discussion. One pointed to studies showing that rural tourism is a new business-attraction tool, and craft-beer brewing fosters economic development. Another article asked, “Is the ‘traditional downtown’ dead?”

Lila wonders whether the city might be able to establish an incubator to help retail grow in downtown. She would like to see entrepreneurship be a focus, with people looking at how to fill local needs.

Goldendale should be a great place for a microbrewer, she says. It has access to good water, grain and the Yakima Valley, one of the country’s leading



Gary and Lila Burgess stand outside of Road Runner Rental Center, where they provide a variety of tools and equipment to meet community members’ needs.

hops-growing regions.

“I don’t know why the companies that have considered us have decided not to move here,” Lila says. “I’d like to see if someone, some group, could figure out how to court those businesses.”

With just their teenage son still at home, Lila works at Road Runner Rental Center, the business Gary started last August with business partner Randy Dyche.

Gary often had to rent things, and after Goldendale’s last rental center closed, “it just seemed like a need that needed to be met,” Lila says.

From his construction firm, Gary supplied quite a few items to the rental center inventory. The building belongs to Randy, whose wrecker and towing business and truck repair shops are next door.

In addition to running the rental business, Gary drives semis and tow trucks for Randy.

When it came to rounding out the rental center’s equipment list last year, “all of us kept our eyes open,” Gary says.

Lila went to local estate sales, and called when she spotted tools that might work. They were able to acquire much of their stock locally. That gave them the chance to ensure the tools were in good working order before buying them.

That approach was better than taking a chance at auctions, Gary says, although they did have to go out of town to buy some specialty items. The inventory has continued to grow, in part because local people come to the rental center if they have tools to sell.

“We want to support the people who support us,” Gary says. “That’s the way it ought to be.”

Road Runner rents equipment ranging from power nailers to carpet-laying tools, from chainsaws and generators to ladders and concrete tools. The firm also rents heavy equipment, including a log splitter, a D3 dozer and a Bobcat track loader.

If a homeowner comes in to get tools



**Top, the rental center building at 1180 Broadway St., Goldendale. Above, Gary and Lila survey the items available for rent.**

for a project, “we’ll walk you through it,” Gary says.

Road Runner also can supply an equipment operator and—according to the rental center’s website, [www.rrrental.com](http://www.rrrental.com)—“handymen (and women!) who are the rare jacks of all trades and masters of quite a few.”

Lila reminds visitors to Reimagine Goldendale that “as a community we can

make things happen.”

“We never really wanted to see Goldendale turn into a small version of Portland, just let it continue to be a small town,” she says. “But we’d like to see it thrive, to supply basic needs so people would not have to go to The Dalles unless they wanted to.”

“We should focus on the people we have here, what they need and want.” ■