

Adulation follows

Naomi Silver in her role
with Rochester Red Wings

By KEVIN OKLOBZIJA

Her father saved baseball in Rochester and, years later, her mother made sure a family vision lived on by chairing the board of directors of Rochester Community Baseball.

Naomi Silver, however, never saw herself becoming a baseball executive. The heir apparent to the role of Rochester Red Wings team president she was not. At least not in her mind.

Sure, she had helped manage stock transfers when the team's bank stopped doing so 30 years ago. And she ordered T-shirts, caps and other merchandise for the team store when the team still played on Norton Street at Silver Stadium.

But those weren't paid duties. She was just volunteering as a way to help out and stay busy.

Yet here she is — 62 years after the Morrie Silver-led stock drive kept the Red Wings in town and 45 years after his death — actively guiding the longest continually operating franchise in all of minor league sports.

Naomi Silver is president, chief executive officer and chief operating officer of Rochester Community Baseball, an entity with 33 full-time employees and another 504 seasonal workers. She's the only woman in professional baseball to hold the title of CEO. Just one other, Lani Silber Weiss, has the title of president and COO (for the Class-A Potomac Nationals).

"I never thought I'd be doing this," Silver said, "probably because I never saw a woman in a position of power in baseball."

The question now, however, is: why wouldn't she be running the team?

"She is a tremendous leader," said Dan Mason, who joined the team's payroll in 1990, four years before his current boss, and has been general manager since 1995. "Leaders have that 'it' factor and she has that. When people meet her, they sense that."

"And she earned her role; it wasn't given to her."

That's because Silver, 60, understands the business. She was only 15 when her father died in 1974, but she saw how he ran the team, and how her mother, Anna Silver, oversaw operations as board chair from 1981 to 1990.

She also got to know the internal operations by filling those ancillary roles three decades ago, first with stock transfers, then with the team store, and finally in the bookkeeping department.

"She learned the ins and outs of the operation from the ground up," Mason said.

Impressed with her acumen and willingness to learn, the board named her chief operating officer in 1994.

"Gary Larder (the current chairman of the board) and the late Elliot Curwin (team president) were deeply involved as board members and they believed in me," Silver said.

Baseball, hot dogs ...

Having assumed an official front-office position, Silver immediately began to examine the food service operation. To her, the idea of paying an outside concessionaire to sell hot dogs and beer to Red Wings fans didn't make total sense. Or dollars and cents.

So she pushed to make concessions an in-house operation.

"It's intimidating to take over your own concession business because it's a big business," said Larder, who has been an officer with Rochester Community Baseball since 1982.

Nonetheless, the Wings were ready for the challenge in 1997, when they left a well-past-its-prime Silver Stadium for the beauty of Frontier Field.

Talk about hitting a home run. The food at Frontier Field is very much part of the attraction of Red Wings baseball today. From traditional ball park fare to trash plates and vegan wraps, there's something for every palate, thanks to the creativity of food and beverage GM Jeff Dodge.

With many entertainment options, dining is often a before-the-event order of business: Dinner and movie, dinner and a play, dinner and a concert. With the Red Wings, it's dinner at the ball game. Want proof? In each of the past three seasons, food sales have grossed more than \$4 million.

"Concessions are very important for us for two reasons," Larder said. "It's a profit maker for us, but also indirectly it helps people have a reason to come to the ball park and enjoy their time at the ball park."

Which is why Silver sought the change 25 years ago. "If we did the food ourselves, we could react to fans' desires and we could price it more reasonably," she said. "The food we serve is one of the most important features of going to a ball game. Excellent food service allows us to do things like keep ticket costs reasonable."

And as Larder said, it's big business. There are 321 seasonal employees in the food service division.

Every game is a meet-and-greet

One suite at Frontier Field is reserved for the team. Silver uses it to entertain advertisers and business partners. But she's not doing so at every home game. She



Photo by Kate Melton

prefers to be in the stands, chatting with fans. She talks baseball and also listens to concerns.

"I really love the people, whether it's the ushers or the fans," Silver said. "It's just an incredible place to be. You get to see your friends, you get to meet new friends. I tell people, 'You may walk into this place as a stranger but you'll leave with a friend.'"

A wholesome, fun-for-the-family event is the objective of the front office. The team won't always win, but Silver believes the experience always can be enjoyable.

"I think she has created a great family atmosphere, both in the front office and in the stands," Mason said. "For those of us in the front office, she treats us like an extension of her family. And for the fans, she cares tremendously how they are treated. She wants to make sure the fans not only feel appreciated, but that they feel they are a part of Rochester Community Baseball."

For Silver, it's all about family. That's why there's almost always some between-inning activity or challenge taking place on field. And why there are giveaways. And why every Friday and Saturday night throughout the summer features post-game fireworks.

"Not everything you do with family and friends can be as social as a ball game; that's part of the magic," she said. "We want the whole family to come to the game. There's a little of something for everyone. Or a lot of something for everyone."

An ever-lasting legacy

Morrie Silver will never be forgotten. A statue of him greets fans as they enter the gates along Morrie Silver Way. His likeness is affixed to the outfield wall.

Those lasting tributes are reminders of his contributions to baseball in Rochester.

Likewise, the walls of Naomi's office are a family photo album, prominently featuring her mother and father, as well as her son, Morrie, 21, and daughter, Desirée, 17.

"My father, his legacy, I guess that's why I do this," she said, her eyes tearing up. "And my mother was so devoted to my father's dedication to the Red Wings and to the Rochester community. That's all I ever saw."

Her children see the same devotion and dedication. They also have visions of being in the game.

"My son's very involved in baseball and he has an interest in the player development side of the game," she said. "I can honestly say Morrie is here more than I am. And Desirée has every hope of working in the front office."

It's the family ties to the franchise that drive Naomi. "She provides a great deal of impact and energy to the operation," Mason said. "She pays a great deal of attention to making sure everything is right, and I think that's one of the reasons she enjoys being involved."

"It all goes back to making sure her family's legacy is carried out the way she wants it to be carried out."

Fighting for what she believes is right

Just as her father encountered a crisis in 1956 when the St. Louis Cardinals no longer wanted the franchise, Silver faced a dilemma in the winter of 2017-18. The Wings' lease at Frontier Field had expired and negotiations with Monroe County weren't pleasant for either

party.

Tensions were so high during the contentious talks that Silver explored contingency plans, including the possibility of playing in another city and/or selling.

There's nothing minor about Rochester Community Baseball. In 2016, Forbes ranked the Red Wings as the 27th most valuable franchise in all of minor league baseball, estimating its worth at \$27.5 million.

"I don't know if anyone could debate that the ball club is in the best position it's ever been in," said Randy Mobley, International League president.

Since there are just 30 Triple-A franchises, selling would have been fairly easy. From a business sense, that is. From an emotional standpoint, it would have been devastating to Silver.

"But when you think you're not going to be able to negotiate a lease that will allow you to be financially viable, you have to start thinking about the franchise and your obligation to the league," she said.

Mobley made trips to Rochester from the league office in Dublin, Ohio, to act as an intermediary between the team and Monroe County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo.

"I witnessed first-hand the level of commitment Naomi has, not only to the ball club but in the ball club as it relates to the community's interest," Mobley said. "Her handling of the situation certainly fortified what I would have expected."

A new 10-year lease, which will run through the 2027 season, was signed in February 2018. The deal can be extended for an additional 10 years if both parties agree.

Some 18 months later, there apparently are no hard feelings. On zoo night at Frontier Field in July, Dinolfo declared that the snow leopard cub born at the Seneca Park Zoo would be named Silver.

"From Morrie and Anna to Naomi, the Silver family name is synonymous with excellence, kindness, and community engagement," Dinolfo said in making the announcement. "In short, the Silvers are as much a part of Rochester as the Red Wings themselves, and there is no question that our new cub will have big 'paws' to fill with such a meaningful name."

A 'team' effort

Silver says having a cross-section of the community represented on the board of directors is invaluable. She says the same about her dedicated front-office staff. And she said it's impossible to quantify the contributions of Mason and Larder.

"Gary is so dedicated to the team and he's more than a full-time board chair," she said. "Every team wishes they had a Gary Larder."

"Dan and I as a team have done well by our fans and our community because we see eye to eye on the most important aspect of our jobs: making fans and clients feel appreciated, and feel proud of what this ball club means to this community."

Thus, the litmus test for Silver is simple. "If it doesn't meet our standards of pleasing the fans and the community, it doesn't go any farther. That's where we start every decision-making process."

After all, it is Rochester Community Baseball, which is near and dear to Silver.

"She's rightfully very proud of the ball club," Larder said, "and the role of the ball club in our community."

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