

LIVING NORTH

From
HIGH HEELS
to
HARD HAT
Meet Judy Peres

**At home in the
NORTHLAND**

Introducing the
**MEAT 'N' POTATO
MAN!**

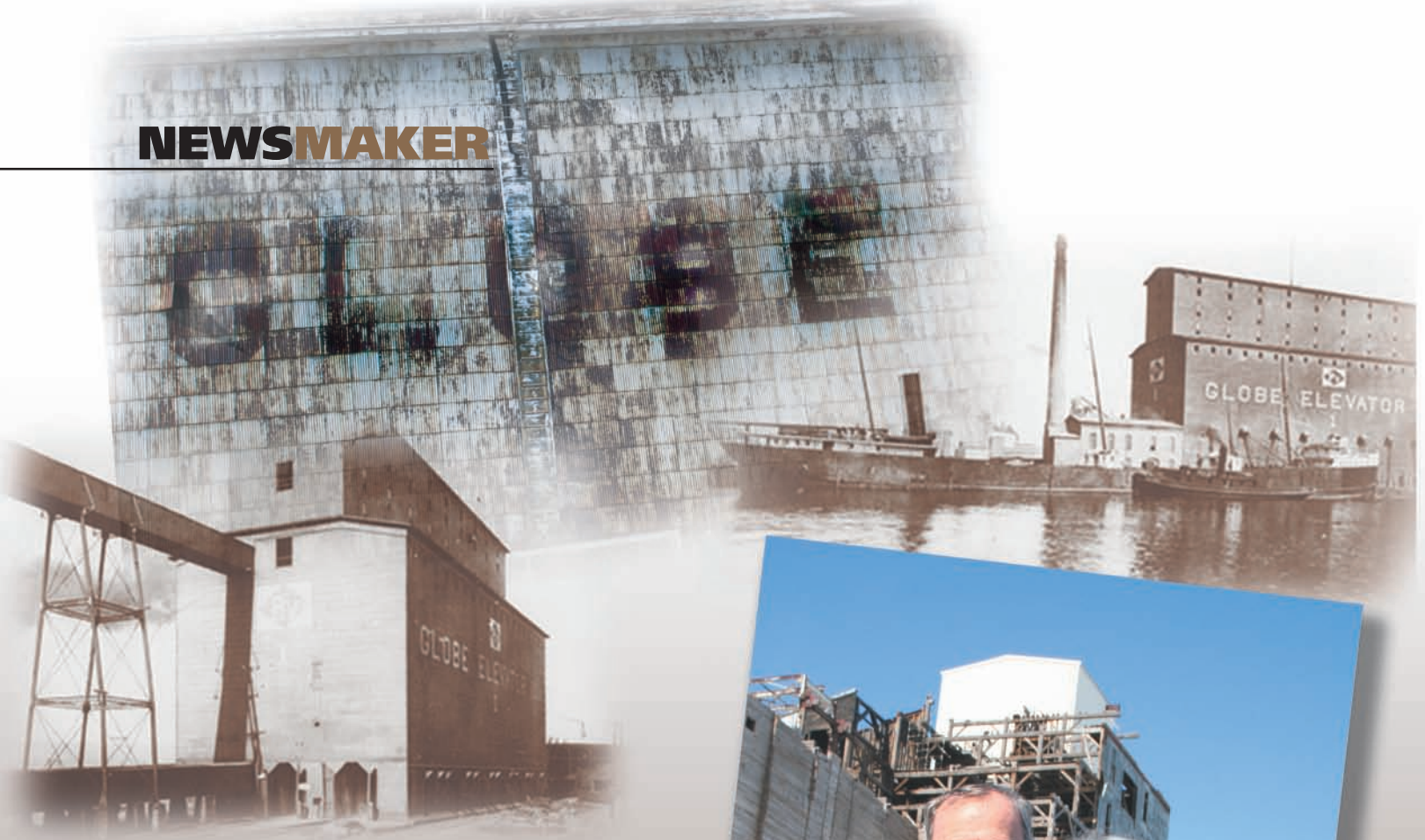
APRIL 2009 • \$2.75



7 85186 00410 2

livingnorthmagazine.com

NEWSMAKER



GLOBE-AL *endeavor*

Judy Peres,

former national editor and senior
writer from the Chicago Tribune



David Hozza,

former Minneapolis
investment banker



Wisconsin
Woodchucks



Story by Lucie Amundsen
Photography by Amy Nichols

an endeavor (ĕn-dĕav'or) is a purposeful or industrious undertaking that requires effort...!

Less than a year ago Judy Peres lived in a coveted Chicago neighborhood not far from Lake Michigan. Her status as the Chicago Tribune's national editor and a senior writer made her a recognized figure and a frequent guest at conferences and on television.

Today Peres wakes up in a Superior, Wis. apartment, which she's proudly furnished with thrift and yard sale items. There she steps into her insulated overalls, dons her steel shank boots and pockets a holdover from her old life: a Blackberry. When she arrives at her Wisconsin Woodchuck's office, she's likely to stuff her curly salt-and-pepper hair under a hard hat and, on any given day, may drive the forklift. Being president of a company that reclaims and sells lumber products is not the natural progression for this 62-year-old's impressive resume. Frankly, the whole thing plays like that old Talking Heads song imploring, "How did I get here?"

The Adventure Begins

It started a few years back when she was in a long distance relationship with Minneapolis investment banker David Hozza. "It was the perfect arrangement for me," says Peres who met Hozza online. "We were able to immerse ourselves in our daily work and have a good time in each other's city."

Hozza had been working with a client to develop a Superior bayfront property, but no lender would touch the project. They saw the three old grain elevators on the property as a liability; Hozza saw them as a vault filled with valuable old growth timbers.

When the Chicago Tribune offered Peres a buyout, she decided to join Hozza on what was to be a short-lived adventure. By that time he had moved near the Globe grain elevators and had retained the right to sell the structures' recovered wood. The plan had been to harvest these valuable timbers, quickly sell them on the home-crazed market and move on to the next thing. "Initially David thought he could do it in about eight months, maybe a year," says Peres. That was three years ago and they've yet to finish one of three 15-story elevators which hold an estimated six million feet of virgin wood.

The Adventure Continues and Continues . . .

With the project taking longer, the couple has become more savvy. For instance, instead of racking up huge rental bills for the heavy equipment they needed, they bought used. "When interest rates dropped and I was looking to refinance my condo, my lender

called and told me there was a mistake on my credit report. There was a loan for a crane on it," laughs Peres. With the majority of the couple's resources tied up in a business affected by the housing slowdown, Peres is adjusting to a financially tighter lifestyle. "Whatever illusion there is of security, I used to have it," says Peres of her old Chicago life where she enjoyed a guaranteed income and medical benefits. Now she hunts for bargains, "I got a brand-new still in the plastic queen-sized mattress at auction for \$40," she beams.

And Peres is also learning the ropes of a barter economy. "I needed a sign for the office and was able to trade for a load of firewood." This sort of creative ingenuity was not part of her former urban life and Peres finds that invigorating. "I am constantly learning from mistakes so there's a lot of positive reinforcement from surmounting obstacles; it's very

satisfying," she says. "There aren't a lot of days I go to bed with nothing to show for it."

Recently her biggest coups have been seeking out new niche markets for her products. In addition to selling rare timbers, dimensional wood and artistic grain-polished wall sections (years of passing grain has eroded the wood giving it a unique multi-dimensional look), Peres is now selling the very wrought iron used to hold the structures together.

Because wrought iron is no longer produced on a commercial scale, turn-of-the-century pipe and nails are valuable to artisans. Peres has made creative use of the Internet, reaching out to blade makers and other artisans who make period objects. "I recently made a sale to an ironworker who makes Viking tripods with traditional methods," says Peres. "He's been very impressed with the purity of the iron."



Judy Peres, once a hard-hitting Chicago journalist, in her new role as construction worker and fork lift driver in Superior.

She has also successfully navigated the bureaucracy of Old Colonial Williamsburg, a division of the National Park Service, to close a substantial iron sale for their blacksmith shop. “That transaction took months,” confesses Peres, whose reporter’s research abilities and tenacity serve her well.


Trade-Offs

Of course, running any business in a downturn economy is stressful. But Peres now realizes that her old life, while seemingly stable, had surprising amounts of hidden stress. “The days were long, sometimes 18 hours and there’s the deadline pressures and the feeling that you’re only as good as your last story.” She finds relief in smaller town living with its slower pace. “People here are generally friendly and polite ... People were not always friendly and polite in Chicago, let’s just put it that way,” Peres laughs.

Before making the leap from the Windy City, it was a scary time for Peres. “The last couple of months before I left [the Chicago Tribune], I had a lot of anxiety. I didn’t know how much of my personal identity was wrapped up in my job and I was afraid of going through a big bereavement for that loss,” she says of her 28-year career at the newspaper.

In her position, people recognized her name and promptly returned her calls. “People don’t always return my calls these days,” confesses Peres, “but I’ve been so busy and challenged by my new life there has been no time to miss my old life. It’s hard to be miserable when you’re having a good time.”

These good times in the Twin Ports have also included plenty of culture. “Since I’ve been here I’ve been to the ballet, the symphony and art museums,” says Peres, who only really misses the culturally diverse neighborhoods in Chicago. There she’d indulge cravings for Indian, German and Polish delicacies and “really cheap Asian food.”

The last unexpected transformation for Peres was her opinion of the austere, industrial landscapes around St. Louis Bay. The light gray silos that dot the shoreline share the same hue as the frozen water and winter sky. “I used to think it was bleak,” she admits, “but now I find it quite beautiful.” 



Above: Timber, artistically shaped by years inside a grain elevator hopper, is sought after by artisans and builders. Below: A tunnel, partially dismantled, inside one of the grain elevators.

