

Legacy of Wheelers founder lives on

Expansion of Wisconsin Rapids dealership coming soon

By Jim Servi
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Ann Wheeler had a passion for her companies. As one of the few women to own a dealership in the United States, she was a visionary and pioneer in the automotive industry. She wanted more, and demanded more from her company. Most importantly she worked harder than most to achieve those visions.

The result was growing the one dealership, Wheelers

Chevrolet-GMC in Marshfield, that her late husband and she operated to four independent dealerships. They include Wheelers Chevrolet of Marshfield, Wheelers Chevrolet of Wisconsin Rapids, and Wheelers Buick GMC of Wisconsin Rapids along with Wheelers Auto Repair and Tire Center in Marshfield.

Before she unexpectedly passed away on March 22, she had another vision. That vision was to expand their Wisconsin

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Mary Jo and Dan Wheeler are carrying on their mother's vision of growing the family's automotive dealerships.

WHEELERS/EXPANSION IS LIKELY TO CREATE NEW JOBS

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Rapids location. That vision is now coming true.

Her son, Dan Wheeler, and her daughter, Mary Jo Wheeler-Schneller, are now carrying the torch.

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in the cemetery, but rather the honest one," Mary Jo said. "We want to be good stewards of the business that she worked so hard to build. Hopefully, we'll live up to that and make her proud."

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Out of the approximately 458 car dealerships in Wisconsin, only nine are owned by women. Mary Jo co-owns four of those nine. To promote involvement from more women, she is actively involved in General Motor's Women's Retail Network (WRN).

With the following three distinct goals — to make GM the car company of choice for female consumers, provide education and training for female dealers and employees, and to make the retail environment more inclusive for women

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— Dan Wheeler, co-owner, Wheelers auto dealerships

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Wisconsin Rapids was born.

Operating out of their current location was always the temporary plan. Building and expanding was the long-term commitment. "We purchased the stores, moved Buick and GMC over, and are moving on to the next phase of building the new body shop, while completing the building for the Chevy dealership," Dan said. "It was all part of the original plan to have a new building with this expansion."

In the interim, their Buick GMC dealership will move from Eighth Street to the present location of their Chevy dealership, in preparation for the future renovations.

Opening the new Chevy location will only be phase one of the expansion. The body shop will be torn down and a new and expanded body shop will be built right next to the new Chevy dealership on West Grand Avenue.

This second phase is expected to be completed in 2018. The third and final phase is slated for completion in 2019 and brings both dealerships — Wheelers Chevrolet and a new and expanded Wheelers Buick GMC — along the corner of West Grand Avenue and 25th Avenue. With the body shop, under one, 12-acre, footprint, just as Ann envisioned.

"We want this to be a state of the art facility that can support our customers for many years to come," Dan said. After the expansion

employees. "We may have 40 to 50 employees when everything is complete," said Mary Jo, up from their approximately 30 current employees, "and we're always looking to hire, grow, and expand."

The additional area also gives them the opportunity to display more vehicles at that location and adds flexibility. "We have more than 1,000 vehicles between all of our locations and we're able to pull from other stores to support a specific store if needed."

There also is one important facet to this project that goes beyond Wheelers' expansion. The Wisconsin Rapids community is likely to benefit. Besides continuing Ann's legacy of community involvement, they are hoping to spur the local economy.

Recent development has been limited on the side of Wisconsin Rapids where the expansion is occurring. "Both sides of town need to be strong for this community to grow," Mary Jo said when discussing the importance of economic development. "This is a strong community with a lot of potential. We'd like to do our part to help the community grow and keep jobs local."

In this way, Ann's legacy lives on, not just in the hearts of her children, Mary Jo and Dan, or the employees that continue to help Wheelers grow or the many satisfied vehicle owners, but in