

A new Fleis on life

PENINSULA
people

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Cedar native Larry Fleis comes from humble Leelanau beginnings as he was raised about a mile north of Holy Rosary Church, before moving to the metropolis of Cedar early into his life.

The Fleis' name is no stranger to Leelanau County as Larry was one of 12 siblings growing up through the 1950s and 1960s.

"We are a very close family after all of these years," he said.

Every one of the siblings are still here except for his baby sister Rita, who died during a mission trip in Haiti.

Fleis graduated from Glen Lake in 1969, before attending Michigan State University, earning a mechanical engineering degree.

After MSU, he moved to Grand Rapids, and has placed roots in the area while traveling back to Leelanau County whenever he gets the chance.

Roughly 15 years ago, Fleis bought a cottage on the southwest side of Lake Leelanau where he and his wife, Jackie Fleis, also a Cedar native, enjoy their time together.

"We wanted to find a place that we could be able to enjoy with our families on both sides that was perfect," Fleis said.

Most recently, Fleis announced he will be stepping down from the board of F&V Companies Inc., an engineering consulting

firm he co-founded with partner and dear friend, the late Steve VandenBrink, in 1993, after 30 years of service.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed working closely with the principals, our executive team and our employees to achieve our strategic goals," Fleis said. "Together, we have built an incredible company."

The company has grown from two engineers to nearly 300 people in nine offices and more than 50 operations locations with revenues exceeding \$50 million since 1993.

When Fleis graduated from MSU in 1973, he got a job at another engineering firm, where he met VandenBrink.

After working on a number of projects together, VandenBrink and Fleis became close friends. On one Holy Day they were having lunch with a fed-up attitude. That same day they decided to go off on their own, and the rest is history, as they say.

"The company that I was with got acquired and went national. We were working for the small to medium-sized communities. I had been working in the area for 15 years, and I knew lots of clients in west Michigan," Fleis said. "We just decided, we could make it on our own ... It's a business that you got to take care of them and treat them fairly."

F&V was recognized as a "Hot Growth Firm" for being one of the top-100 growing engineering firms in the United States and

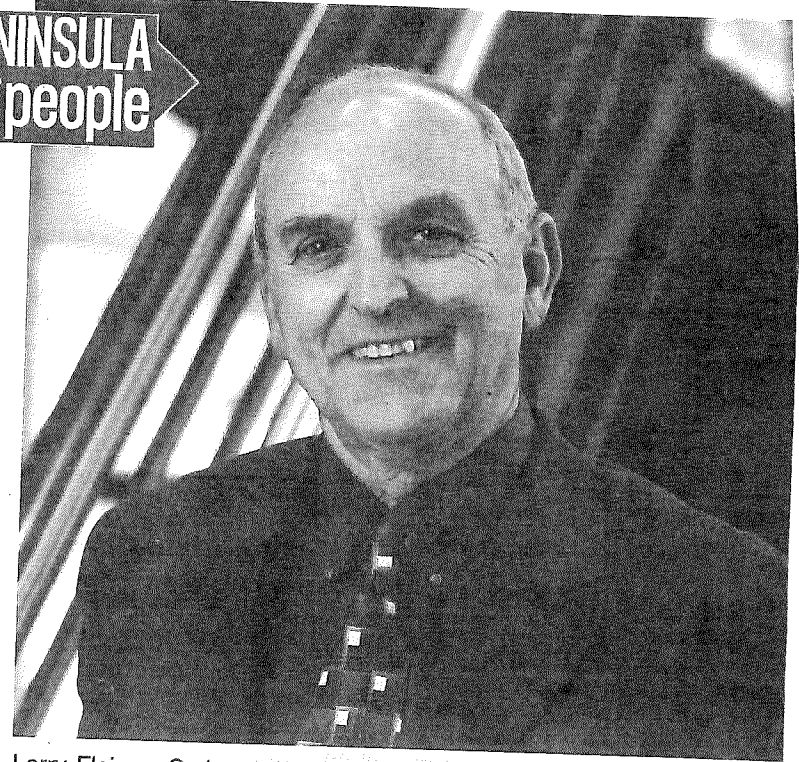
Canada in nine of the last 10 years. Recently, Fleis received prestigious awards such as the Felix A. Anderson Image Award in 2020 from American Consulting Engineers of Michigan, and the Civil and Environmental Engineering Distinguished Alumni Award from MSU, in 2019.

"(Fleis) helped lay a solid foundation of positive culture, relationships, business principles, and technical excellence that has allowed our firm to reach new heights," said John DeVol, FVCI President in a press release. "(Fleis) and (VandenBrink) firmly believed that growth was important ... Their strategy was that growth in the company allows for growth in opportunities and growth in the staff's careers."

Fleis has slowly been unwinding his role at the company five years ago when he stepped down as the companies president.

"I think that was a very healthy thing for me ... It's a lot of hours, just a lot of good days and some bad days and it takes quite an effort," Fleis said. "(Since then) We made up some COVID trips that were all postponed or canceled the same year that we really went to part time ... so we've been doing that."

Fleis remains active in the community by volunteering his time to the Cedar River project, and at his parish, while also being the chair of the Ed & Irene Education Foundation that has



Larry Fleis, a Cedar native, stepped down as a board member of F&V companies Inc., in September. *Courtesy photo*

donated well-over half a million dollars in scholarship to Leelanau County graduates.

Fleis is also known as an avid musician after he started playing the accordion in 1967.

"As our kids become young teenagers and older teenagers, we decided to stop playing regularly. It's been 30-plus years since we played regularly, but we still play occasionally. It's usually a charitable thing," he said.

Some of his memorable performances happened at the Cedar Polka Fest since they started in 1993. They also have fond memories playing at Holy Rosary

Church.

"That's very special to us. That's our hometown," he said.

Fleis has three children, and five grandchildren, who are sunshine to his life.

"I thought by now we would have moved to Cedar and retired out there, but those five grandkids ... It's going to be a while, just way too much fun with them, and watching their sports or whatever they are doing," Fleis said.

Larry and Jackie are currently enjoying themselves on a cruise up the Mississippi River, which is a bucket list item for them.