

From Medical Supply Routes to State Parks: Stephen McDaniel on What an Administrator Actually Owes the Experts

How a career built on delivery promises across West Virginia reshaped the way one director ran a state agency, from St. Augustine, Florida.

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In a field where leadership is usually handed to the most credentialed specialist in the room, a quieter argument has been gaining ground: that running an institution and practicing its craft are two different jobs, and confusing them costs the institution.

[Stephen McDaniel](#) of St. Augustine, Florida spent five years testing that argument inside the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. He arrived with no wildlife background at all. His training was in medical supply, home infusion pharmacy, and the unglamorous work of getting products to facilities on the day they were promised.

He said so out loud in his first weeks, which is not the usual move for a new agency head.

A Path Built Through a Windshield

McDaniel grew up in Bridgeport, West Virginia, the son of Paul T. McDaniel, who ran nursing homes in the region. He enrolled at West Virginia University to study business and left after two years, at twenty, when his father spotted an opening in Part B medical supply for long term care facilities.

He had been on a different track. [McDaniel](#) had qualified as a National Board Certified Long Term Care Administrator and was working through the required administrator in training year inside the family business. He left it anyway. His sister Traci eventually took that business over.

"The opening was open right then, not in three years when I would have finished," McDaniel says of the decision. He does not present it as courage. The alternative, as he describes it, was watching his father take the risk alone.

In the late 1980s father and son started Ultra Care Inc. The work put McDaniel in a car five days a week, calling on facilities across the state. He handled roughly fifty accounts personally and reached nearly every one of West Virginia's fifty-five counties on a weekly basis.

"Through my family's business, I visited nearly every county once a week," McDaniel says. "It's how I fell in love with West Virginia." He has described those miles as the most useful education he received, and the claim is harder to dismiss than it sounds, because most people who say they know a state have only driven through it.

The Business That Taught Him What Failure Looks Like

By the mid-1990s the company had moved up the chain into home infusion and pharmacy services, operating as Total Health Services of WV out of Clarksburg and Fairmont. The product was clinical. Parenteral nutrition, chemotherapy administration, pain management, catheter care, all delivered to people in their own homes.

That is a business where reliability is the entire proposition. A patient at home has no backup pharmacy down the hall and no night nurse to catch a missed delivery.

"You learn to see a system failing before anybody reports it," McDaniel says. "Nobody forgives a late delivery when the delivery is chemotherapy." He and his father sold both companies in the late 2000s, and a non-compete carried him out of the industry a few years after that.

He finished the degree he had abandoned, in business and psychology, through evening study at the Fairmont State campus in his hometown.

An Administrator Among Specialists

Governor Jim Justice appointed McDaniel Director of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources in the late 2010s. The post put four operating sections under one desk: Parks and Recreation, Wildlife Resources, Law Enforcement, and the Office of Land and Streams. A hospitality operation, an applied science organization, a police agency, and a land company.

Almost nobody is qualified for all four. McDaniel decided the job was not to be.

"Doctors don't run hospitals, administrators do," he says. "But you don't want an administrator doing your brain surgery." It is a healthcare person's framing, drawn directly from an industry organized around that exact division of labor.

He applied it the first chance he got. "I'm an administrator. I've got my doctors here in the agency. They know what to do. I'm going to get out of their way."

Getting out of the way turned out to be harder than the phrase suggests. It requires understanding the work well enough to recognize competence, then absorbing the consequences when a specialist's judgment proves wrong. Micromanagement is easier, because it at least feels like contribution.

What the Money Bought

What McDaniel did take on was capital, legislation, and procurement. Over his tenure the agency directed more than 151 million dollars into state park and forest improvements and added 85,896 acres of public hunting ground. A 30 million dollar hatchery rebuild aimed to raise statewide trout holding capacity from 800,000 pounds to roughly 1.25 million.

Sunday hunting became law statewide, opening around 1.5 million acres of public ground. The West Virginia State Parks Endowment was established, funded by oil and gas royalties from state land. A rebuilt licensing system went live and worked on a phone.

None of that requires knowing how to age a deer by its teeth. All of it requires someone who can move a budget through a legislature. Hunting and fishing license revenue climbed three years running to its highest level in more than twenty years, and state park revenue set a record, up twenty-two percent against the year before he took the post.

A Family Operation on a Mountain

Before the agency and after it, there were the trees. McDaniel planted what became Mozark Mountain Tree Farm on a mountain in Tucker County, West Virginia, in the early 2010s, and still runs it as sole

proprietor. Retail and wholesale. The farm opens the Friday after Thanksgiving and runs until the trees are gone.

His children come up each November to plant and harvest, which is the labor model rather than a sentimental detail. Nathan is a contractor in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Paul is a contractor in St. Augustine. Ali is an attorney in Washington, working on Capitol Hill. There is a granddaughter, with another grandchild on the way.

McDaniel is Catholic and attends Mass in both states, at All Saints in Bridgeport and the Basilica Cathedral in St. Augustine. He holds life memberships in Trout Unlimited, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Quail Forever, Ducks Unlimited, the National Rifle Association, the West Virginia Deer Association, and Shriners Children's Hospital, and sat on the board of United Hospital Center in Bridgeport.

Looking Ahead From Two States

He left the directorship in the early 2020s and stayed on as an advisor through the leadership transition. The stated reason for going was not complicated.

"Five years away from your family is a lot," McDaniel says. "They've sacrificed a lot for me to follow this dream."

Asked what came next, he gave the shortest answer available: "I'm going to fish more, I know that."

He has done that, on two continents and in more than a dozen countries, and has appeared as a guest on Fly Rod Chronicles with Curtis Fleming, a fishing program carried on ESPN2 and the Pursuit Channel for more than twenty seasons. He splits the year between Florida and the mountain, with a black Lab named Seneca.

The record he left behind belongs mostly to people whose names were never in a press release. That appears to be the point.

About Stephen McDaniel

Stephen McDaniel is a Bridgeport, West Virginia native who divides his time between St. Augustine, Florida and Tucker County, West Virginia. He is sole proprietor of Mozark Mountain Tree Farm, a choose and cut Christmas tree operation in the mountains of Tucker County, and served as Director of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources for five years.

Before entering public service he spent his working life in healthcare, co-founding Ultra Care Inc and Total Health Services of WV with his father, Paul T. McDaniel, and selling both companies in the late 2000s. He holds a degree in business and psychology from Fairmont State College and certification as a National Board Certified Long Term Care Administrator.

McDaniel is a life member of seven conservation, sporting, and children's healthcare organizations, a past board member of United Hospital Center, and a member of the St. Augustine Rod and Gun Club and Stonewall Sporting Clays in Lewis County, West Virginia.

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