



A REIT Player

Tamara Fischer ascends to CEO after instrumental role in NSA's climb.

By Laura Williams-Tracy

Tamara Fischer had served as CFO of a REIT focused on the wine industry and a manufactured-home REIT when, in 2012, a mutual business acquaintance

invited her to lunch to hear Arlen Nordhagen's big idea.

The world of self storage was changing rapidly as revenue management tools and digital marketing were putting distance between the publicly traded REITs and even good-sized operators like Nordhagen's SecurCare Self Storage.

At that time, Fischer was providing consulting services to her former employer, Vintage Wine Trust, Inc., and "working on her golf game." Over lunch, Nordhagen shared his vision for a publicly traded self storage REIT made up of large regional players.

"I went into it thinking, 'Yeah, I don't know,'" Fischer said. "By the time that lunch was over, I was all in. I thought, this is actually intriguing. I started working with Arlen on the structure and helping him develop materials to show other operators."

Following the launch of National Storage Affiliates in 2013 and the company's initial public offering two years later, NSA is now the fifth largest owner and operator of self storage facilities in the U.S. This month, Fischer takes the role of CEO from Nordhagen, who becomes NSA's executive chairman. In addition to moving to her role as CEO, Fischer joins the board of trustees.

A Detroit native and graduate of Case Western Reserve University, Fischer worked in public accounting before joining Chateau Communities, Inc., one of the largest REITs in the manufactured-home sector.

"That was my first experience taking a company public," she said. "Arlen has a lot of experience in a variety of industries, but he hadn't done an IPO before. We had complementary skill sets."

Fischer brought her financial experience to bear on the problems Nordhagen wanted to solve. Namely, how to get from a good-sized private operator to a much larger operator without overpaying for assets and accessing public markets for capital.

"His goal through NSA was to provide a platform for private regional operators to level the playing field with large public peers," she said.

Fischer helped sign the first three PROs to create NSA, and two years later guided the initial public offering at \$13 a share. In November, NSA (NYSE:NSA) was trading around \$32 per share.

In 2018, NSA closed what was called the fourth largest M&A deal in self storage, with the \$1.3 billion acquisition of the 112-store Simply Self Storage portfolio in conjunction with a large institutional joint venture partner.

At the SSA Fall Conference & Trade Show in Las Vegas last September, keynote speaker Mike Burnam, CEO of StorageMart, gave an assessment of NSA's rapid ascent to strength in the marketplace, saying the REIT could be stronger if the PROs rebranded to the same name.

Fischer said it's a topic that's discussed with regularity with analysts. So far, NSA believes the cost of rebranding the stores—at about \$30,000 per store—plus the loss of recognition in online searches, is greater than the perceived benefit of one name. She said storage users tend to select facilities based on location, safety, convenience and cleanliness, with very little based on the brand name.

"In the event that we ever do make that decision, we will have the confidence that the benefits will offset the substantial cost and rebranding risk," Fischer said. "I would never say never on that, though."

It has been eight years since Fischer's lunch with Nordhagen. Since then, she has brought her ability to see strategically from point A to Z to the business and to execute that strategy. Nordhagen, a big collector of data, has provided perspective on how other REITs navigated the early years as public companies and how they grew.

"Arlen is an acknowledged icon in the self storage sector," Fischer said. "I've benefited from the depth and breadth of his knowledge of the industry. He brings a unique perspective to problem solving, and I've learned a lot from him that I plan to carry forward to my tenure as NSA's CEO." ❖