

Wisconsin's 2026 Time Dealer of the Year

NOLAN CAMPBELL

From small-town beginnings to statewide recognition,
Nolan Campbell's journey is proof that big dreams can grow in even the smallest places

BY JILL SUKOW



For Nolan Campbell, the road to dealership ownership was anything but traditional. To those who know him, his humility and drive define him. To Nolan himself, the journey still feels almost unbelievable. It's a story built on hard work, mentorship, and the belief that every challenge carries a lesson.

Until recently, Nolan had really never shared his full story. To do so, he admits, is a vulnerable feeling but one that speaks to the heart of who he is today.

"I've always loved competition," Nolan says with a smile. "Sports, motorcycles, cars, anything fast or challenging. That part of me hasn't changed. But school was different. I was a good student, but I never loved it. A few tough experiences in high school made me question where I was headed. It forced one of the hardest decisions of my life, to leave high school my senior year and earn my HSED instead. I completed my HSED through Madison College and actually graduated a semester early. It wasn't easy. I knew how much my family cared about my future, and it weighed on me. Looking back, I just wasn't mature enough to handle those challenges the right way."

That turning point, while painful, opened the door to a new beginning. When Nolan decided to leave school, his mother made one thing clear, he needed to find a job. Fortunately, she worked next door to Bell Ford and had been a loyal customer for years. A quick conversation with owner Bill Bell led to an opportunity, and Nolan started the next day. From that moment, he was hooked.

"Looking back," Nolan says, "I can't help but feel that Mr. Bell saved me by giving me that opportunity. I had a tremendous amount of thirst to learn the business, and I know he saw promise in my discipline to work."

Graduation day for Nolan's classmates soon arrived. He chose to attend, sitting quietly in the bleachers as his peers walked across the stage in their caps and gowns. The mix of pride and regret was overwhelming. "What did I do?" he wondered. "Why couldn't I have handled things differently?" It was a difficult moment but one that became a turning point.

Bill Bell quickly recognized that drive and eagerness to prove himself, qualities that would soon shape the foundation of Nolan's career. What began as an entry-level job became a calling. He immersed himself in every aspect of the dealership, eager to understand how things worked and how people succeeded. Those early lessons, and the trust Bill placed in him, became the cornerstones of his leadership philosophy today.

Nolan was fortunate to have a mother, a family, and a mentor like Bill Bell. People who believed in him, challenged him, and set high expectations. That fall, at just nineteen years old, Bill promoted him to Service Manager, entrusting him with significant responsibility. Over the years, Nolan worked his way through nearly every position in the dealership, guided by Bill's quiet confidence and encouragement to learn the business from the ground up.

"I've learned there's no perfectly right or wrong decision in life," Nolan reflects. "Every choice simply puts you on a different path. What matters most are the decisions you make once you're on it."

Bill Bell's mentorship didn't just change Nolan's career; it shaped his entire philosophy on leadership. What began as a young man eager to prove himself grew into a leader who values trust, communication, and investing in people. Running a service department of seasoned technicians taught Nolan early on that leadership isn't about authority, it's about respect. "When people see you're willing to roll up your sleeves, they'll follow your lead." Those years taught him patience, humility, and teamwork, lessons Bill instilled through example. Listening first, valuing every role, and helping people grow remain central to Bell Ford's culture today.

The year 2008 was an instrumental one. A time that truly felt like survival mode for Nolan and the team. He vividly remembers their Chevrolet neighbors receiving the infamous letter that GM was closing their dealership. Not long after, an unexpected visitor from Ford arrived, asking to speak with Mr. Bell. Nolan didn't know who the woman was at the time, but he sensed something significant was coming.

A few months later, Bill called three of his managers into a private meeting, a conversation Nolan will never forget. Ford Motor Company had offered a buyout, and the number was large enough that he was seriously considering it. The



managers left in disbelief and sadness. That night, Nolan couldn't sleep. He felt anger, but also a deep determination to prove that they didn't need the offer to survive.

By 3 a.m. the next morning, he was already back at the dealership, reviewing financial statements, expenses, and profit margins, searching for a way forward. When Mr. Bell arrived around 5 a.m. and found him there, Nolan explained what he was doing. Mr. Bell simply looked at him and said, "See what you can come up with." That moment, Nolan says, changed everything.

With the support of the team, Nolan helped guide the dealership out of decline. They cut costs, tightened operations, and rebuilt from within. "It came with heartache, tears, and humility," he reflects, "but it also came with an incredible amount of determination to prove we were meant to do bigger and better things, and we did." Thinking back, he credits that experience with giving him the foundation to lead through any crisis.

In 2013, Nolan was approved by Ford Motor Company as a dealer-owner. That July, he finalized the purchase of Bill Bell's remaining shares, a moment filled with both excitement and gravity. Bill didn't truly want to sell, but he believed in Nolan and knew the timing was right for the dealership's future.

Looking back, Nolan says the single biggest risk he ever took was that very moment, purchasing the dealership and immediately building a new one. He was thirty-five years old, married, with a two-year-old daughter and another on the way. He was looking to borrow \$4 million and had just \$200,000 to his name. "Unproven as an owner to Ford and to the bank, I had some serious convincing to do," he says. "And that included convincing my wife." But determination won out. "I was confident and wanted this so badly," he says. "I was willing to bet everything."

Nolan threw himself into the process, planning, building, and mapping out every financial detail. "I spent countless nights preparing my presentations with every number, projection, and scenario I could think of." Ford approved the plan quickly, but the bank was more cautious. They initially required him to

partner with the SBA due to his lack of ownership experience, but by the time of closing, they had reviewed his work so thoroughly that the bank decided to take on the full loan themselves.

"I learned so much through that time about business, and about myself," Nolan says. "I realized I was smarter, academically, than I ever gave myself credit for. I also learned how much I love people, and how powerful it is to wake up every day excited to build something meaningful."

Construction began in September 2013, and by May 2014, the new Bell Ford opened its doors with a small but determined team of thirteen. What began as a leap of faith quickly became a story of momentum. The next three years brought nearly 40% growth in revenue annually, fueling investments in five additional acres of land and a 88,000-square-foot retail parking expansion in 2016. As service demand surged, a 5,000-square-foot service addition followed in 2019 along with a 17,000-square-foot stand-alone Commercial Vehicle Center in March of this year to further grow capacity and enter the commercial market. Behind every expansion was a belief in people, process, and purpose. Just over a decade later, seventy-five employees now call Bell Ford home, carrying forward the same determination that built it.



Behind Nolan's professional accomplishments is a chapter few people see. About ten years ago, he began battling unexplained pain, stiffness, and fatigue that gradually worsened. After years of uncertainty, he was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis, a chronic condition that has tested both his body and his spirit.

Someone once told him that if he reduced stress, it might get better. But Nolan has often wondered if the opposite is true, that maybe without purpose, it gets worse. "I've always been driven," he says. "When that drive was taken away, it felt like I was losing part of who I was. This time, it was about resilience in a different form. Learning how to accept what I couldn't control while still holding onto the parts of myself that make me who I am."

The past five years have been especially difficult. Once an early riser who thrived on energy and routine, Nolan suddenly found himself struggling just to get out of bed. About a year ago, it hit its worst point with terrible pain, endless fatigue, sleepless nights, and a feeling of defeat unlike anything he had ever known. "It's an invisible disease," he explains. "People don't see the toll it takes."

Through perseverance and a new treatment that began last December, Nolan has found renewed strength and a fresh outlook. "You don't realize how bad you felt until you finally feel good again," he says.

The experience changed his perspective on nearly everything. "Ownership is a gift," Nolan says. "I owe it to my family, our employees, and our community to give my best every day." Living with the disease has taught him that leadership is not about appearing unshakable; it is about showing up even when things are hard. "It reminded me of my early years," he reflects, "when I had to prove to myself that I could succeed despite setbacks. Now, it is about grace and resilience. I can't control everything, but I can control how I show up each day with gratitude and purpose."

That same sense of care extends well beyond the walls of Bell Ford. Over the past five years, Nolan and his team have supported countless causes throughout Columbia and Dane Counties, a reflection of their deep commitment to the people who support them. Their generosity ranges from major investments in the WATDA Foundation and funding K-9 units for the Columbia County Sheriff's Office and Poynette Police Department, to matching employee donations for the Prairie Pride Food Pantry and sponsoring local FFA, 4-H, youth athletics, fire departments, libraries, and veterans' organizations. One of Bell Ford's most cherished traditions, the annual Santa and Reindeer event, has brought more than \$40,000 in gifts, refreshments, and holiday cheer to local families.

For Nolan, giving back is not about recognition; it is about responsibility. "This community built us," he says. "We owe it to them to give back, to show up, and to make a difference."

"As a local business owner, I see it as an incredible privilege," he adds. "I was raised in Arlington, I live here now, and I'm thankful every day to serve our community in ways not everyone can."

At the center of everything is Nolan's family: his wife of nineteen years, Wendy, and their daughters, Raelyn (14) and Paige (12). Their support has been his foundation through every success and setback, grounding him in what truly matters. Family, for Nolan, also includes those who stand beside him every day at the dealership. His older brother, Nathan, has been Bell Ford's lead diesel technician for nearly three decades. "He's been here almost as long as I have," Nolan says proudly. "Thirty years for him, thirty-one for me." The brothers have built their careers side by side, a quiet testament to shared work ethic, loyalty, and mutual respect.

That dedication to family and continuity now extends to the next generation. Nolan's nephew, Haydin, serves as Sales Manager and is emerging as a capable leader within the organization, representing both the dealership's future and the values that have guided it for decades. Both of Nolan's daughters are beginning to spend time around the dealership, getting a firsthand look at what it means to build something through effort and integrity. "They're learning what work ethic really means," he says. "I tell them often, you don't have to be the smartest person in the room; just be kind, work hard, and do something that matters."

For Nolan, legacy is defined not by what he has built but by who he has built it with. Family, mentorship, and purpose have remained the constants guiding every decision and every season of his journey. Success, to him, has never been measured by numbers but by the lives he's touched and the community that continues to believe in him. He often pauses to reflect on the many influential people who helped shape his path. Mentors who taught him that true leadership is rooted in humility, trust, and action, and whose examples he now strives to model for others.

His mother, Jane, was one of the most significant influences in his life. She was the steady force behind everything, always guiding him to be a good person first. "She kept me grounded and focused," Nolan says. He was also fortunate to grow up close to his grandparents. His grandfather, who lived right in town, was a sharp, business-minded man Nolan could always turn to for advice. His grandmother brought warmth and kindness to everything she did. "When we were at the old dealership," Nolan recalls with a smile, "she made me lunch every day and brought cookies for the staff each morning."

Nolan also counts his CPA, Brent Wagner as both an advisor and a lifelong friend. "There probably wasn't anyone more instrumental from a monetary standpoint than him," Nolan says. "He helped with the valuation and negotiation of the dealership purchase with Bill and me and has been a steady



source of guidance ever since." And then there's the network of dealers in his 20 Group, many of whom have become close friends and trusted confidants. "That group has been phenomenal," he says. "Many of them are my best friends today. You learn from people like that."

His involvement with the Wisconsin Automobile and Truck Dealers Association has also been an important part of his professional growth. "I can honestly say that being involved with the association and sitting on the board, the professional knowledge and understanding of what's really going on out there is invaluable," Nolan says. "In addition, you're surrounded by a group of fantastic, successful dealers who have done things really well. Those friendships are invaluable."

Each of these relationships, from family to mentors to peers, has left a lasting mark on Nolan's journey. The lessons learned from them continue to shape Bell Ford's culture today. Nolan always credits his mentor for shaping both his career and his character. "Mr. Bell took a chance on a misguided kid who left school early," he says. "He taught me discipline, values, and kindness. Bill believed in me before I even believed in myself. He was so much more than a mentor; he was very much a father figure to me." Those lessons continue to guide Nolan's leadership every day. Through challenges and triumphs, he remains grounded in gratitude. For the people who believed in him, the employees who stand beside him, and the community he serves. That community of just 830 people in Arlington has always been his anchor. A reminder that greatness doesn't depend on size, but on heart, perseverance, and the people who believe in you. •