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Syngenta is inspired by the recipients of the 2016 Lawn & Landscape Leadership Awards; their dedication to lead the industry forward drives our passion to develop solutions that make a difference. As former President John Quincy Adams said, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”

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Stephanie Schwenke

Turf Market Manager
Syngenta Lawn and Garden

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What started with a toy designed for kids took Paul Fields to the top of a multi-million-dollar landscaping company.

By Brian Horn

All Paul Fields Needed for Entertainment

As a child was an Etch A Sketch and tiller. But it was his mother’s taste in magazines that really got him thinking about a career in landscape architecture.

One day after school in the mid-1980s, Fields came home and picked up a copy of his mother’s Southern Living magazine. He came across an article about a garden that was designed by a landscape architect.

A landscape architect?

Fields had no idea what those two words together meant, but they combined two hobbies he loved: drawing and working in gardens.

“I did a little more research and found out there was actually a career called landscape architecture,” says Fields, who is president and director of design at Lambert Landscape Company in Dallas.

“The next year, senior year, I started looking at possibilities of different universities that offered degrees in landscape architecture and ended up suddenly at Mississippi State getting my degree in landscape architecture.”

Dirt and drawing

For as long as Fields can remember, he loved drawing and wanted to be an architect.

As a first-grader, he loved drawing floor plans and buildings, and would use an Etch A Sketch to create the drawings.

Fields was so proficient at using the Etch A Sketch as a first-grader that his parents would want to save them.

“I remember drawing a full three-dimensional rendering of the family room of my parents’ home and them just being amazed,” he says. “They put it up on the mantle and wouldn’t let me touch it.”

When he wasn’t sketching away on his toy, he was helping his grandfather, who was a farmer, and his father, who grew up on the farm, with landscaping and gardening projects.

“My grandfather gave me his old tiller,” he says. “I can remember coming home from school and the first thing I would do – and the handlebars were about at eye level on the tiller – I could work and work and get it started, and loved to till the garden when I got home from school in first grade.”

As Fields got older, his love for both drawing and landscaping didn’t wane, but became more intense, especially after he realized he could make a career as a landscape architect.

In high school, he had a vision of owning a nursery and design/build firm, and while in college, he found that company already existed.

“I ran into someone from Lambert’s, got to talking to him, and he encouraged me to come over to their booth,” he says.

“And he told me more about the company, and I got this eerie feeling at the time. I’m like, ‘Wow. That sounds exactly like the company I’ve envisioned in my mind that I want to build.’”

After three internships with the company, Fields was hired...
full time, but little did he know those internships would eventually lead to becoming president of his company.

All eyes on you
Frank Mariani, owner of Mariani Landscape in Chicago, has known Fields for almost 25 years, and often refers to Lambert’s as “Mariani West” and vice versa.

Both companies service high-end clientele, and Mariani says Fields’ love for the industry, specifically landscape architecture, is evident in his company’s work.

“His passion and his attention to detail are something that I find inspiring and hard to emulate,” he says.

“He will focus in on the most minute detail just to make a project perfect. It’s what takes a project from being very, very good to excellent.”

While that passion has helped Fields, who bought the company with two other partners in 2005, become a top-notch landscape architect, it has made the transition to president somewhat difficult for him.

“It’s been really challenging for me, primarily because I can’t focus solely on the thing I enjoy most, which is designing,” he says.

The biggest surprises he encountered when stepping into the role was how much money went to overhead.

“As an employee, you always look at what a company charges and think, ‘Oh, my gosh, the owners are making a killing,’” he says.

“But when you actually get into the nuts and bolts, so to speak, of the financial side of a business, it really shows you how there’s a small fraction of every dollar we earn that actually goes to the bottom line.”

There is always pressure to grow the bottom line and, as vice president, the spotlight wasn’t on him to make a final decision on how that can exactly be done.

“Everybody’s looking at you for direction, and sometimes you just have to admit you don’t always have the answer,” he says. “You have to start reaching out to different people that you know.”

That is one personality trait Mariani says serves Fields well in a leadership role.

“He’s not afraid to seek outside help and he recognizes where he is weak,” Mariani says.

“Any entrepreneur can gain from that because some entrepreneurs make the silly mistake of thinking they need to be all things to all people. I think the best entrepreneur is a team-builder.”

Being the boss
As if the pressure of making crucial decisions for the company wasn’t enough when transitioning to president, Fields also had to come to the realization that he was now the boss.

“I try to approach everyone as a peer, but people look at you differently when you’re in the actual leadership role,” he says.

“I guess that was the hardest thing for me to kind of understand. I don’t know that I still fully get it or grasp it.”

Fields says it was easier to solve personnel or organizational issues when he wasn’t president because people were more open with him at the time and more willing to talk about the issues.

“Sometimes they’re not always as open or willing to admit there are issues or problems to somebody who’s in that leadership position,” he says.

So, he tries to take an employee to lunch on days that he doesn’t have something on his calendar.

“I love to eat, so it’s kind of a fun thing for me to get an employee away from the office and just talk a little bit about what’s going on in their life personally, but also delve into the professional side a little bit,” Fields says.

“It gives me a little better insight to the day-to-day goings on in the company, as well.”

Eventually, Fields would like to relinquish control of the day-to-day operations, while still designing and serving in a visionary role.

“Titles don’t mean much to me,” he says.

“I’d be perfectly happy if someone picked up the president title and ran with the running of the day-to-day business and allowed me to do those other things.”

“I remember drawing a full three-dimensional rendering of the family room of my parents’ home and them just being amazed. They put it up on the mantle and wouldn’t let me touch it.”

Paul Fields, president and director of design, Lambert Landscape Company

Magical meeting

FIELDS HAS ONLY WORKED one other place as a professional, and that was an internship at Disney World after his freshman year at Mississippi State University. An advisor/professor told Fields he thought he’d be a great fit for the company and discovered last minute they were on campus that day. After spending two long nights in a row working on a project, which gave him no time to shower, Fields got word that if he could interview immediately, they would meet with him.

“So, not having had a shower, I was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, didn’t have anything with me other than the roll of drawings that I was going to present that project on,” he says. “I walked in and she said, ‘You know what? I think you’d be a great fit for us,’ and hired me for an internship at Disney.”
Zachary Johnson spends his time in the industry molding the minds of others around him.

By Katie Tuttle

The industry is evolving, and more and more companies are seeking out employees with horticulture degrees that they hope will carry on the green industry legacy. In order to achieve this, industry members need to take the time to guide future industry leaders.

One person doing so is Zachary Johnson.

“(Zach is) all about exposing his kids to different parts of the world and different kinds of lives,” says Kristen Fefes, executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. “Until you get to know him, you don’t know how deep he really runs. It’s really impressive.”

Photo courtesy of Zachary Johnson
Currently, Johnson teaches a program at Colorado State University—a program he took when he was a student there. That previous knowledge, as well as his industry experiences, provide him the chance to give his students a unique look at what opportunities are out there for them.

As part of the program, Johnson has a class called Professional Landscape Practices, which he started with the late Todd Williams, former president of Terracare Associates. Every week, the class invites industry professionals to come do a guest lecture on a variety of landscape topics ranging from landscape design to finances.

“It’s a way for students who have been in the philosophical, theoretical world learning about these things, to hear from business owners,” says Kristen Fefes, executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. She knows Johnson through the ALCC, which he’s been a member of for more than 20 years.

Fefes says real world experience for the students is something the ALCC board has been trying to work on with the university. Because of this, the ALCC helps fund the program.

“We think the outcome is so important,” she says. “And so is the idea behind it.”

“We think the outcome is so important,” she says. “And so is the idea behind it.”

“While university study is important, it’s just a piece. I think it’s cool to get that perspective from people who have been out and done that. It benefits the students.”

Zachary Johnson, professor, Colorado State University

This program is his brainchild, and it earned him ALCC’s Person of the Year Award.

“I’ve had the occasion just here and there to be around him in his classroom or see him interact with his students,” says Becky Garber, communications director with the ALCC. “It’s very clear that his students respect him and it’s just fun to watch him interact with them.”

Peer focused

Education in the industry shouldn’t just be limited to students, and Johnson is playing a role in that.

Next Level Network is one of Bruce Wilson’s peer groups that Johnson is involved in. Each year, a handful of professors come to the annual meeting and have the opportunity to educate members on how to better recruit students and new employees.

“We work with them and help them understand that each generation is a little different,” he says. Fefes credits Johnson with sometimes being the voice of reason at association board meetings.

“I think he is one of the smartest people in our industry,” she says. “He’s incredibly thoughtful, meaning he really thinks through things.”
When a topic is being discussed, Johnson will often focus on the other side of the conversation or ask the group if they were really talking about the bigger picture and how it would affect members and the industry.

“We teased him sometimes around the board table of being the contrarian,” Fefes says. “At ALCC he was not always out front in the most vocal way, but he did it from behind to make sure the right discussion was being had.”

**Sustainable partners**

Johnson also chaired a group with the ALCC that started a program called the Green Strategies Program. “It’s a program where companies and businesses can actually become what we’re calling sustainable partners,” he says.

Each year, participants go through a series of classes, with different presentations on design, construction and maintenance ideas to make projects more sustainable.

“It’s a way to really look at our profession in a way that demonstrates that we do good things,” he says. “The reality is a lot of things we do aren’t good for the planet. We drive around trucks all day long, we drive around mowers all day long. At the end of the day, there’s a lot of offsets in terms of what we’re doing.”

He says the key idea to the program is to improve a company’s bottom line in terms of fiscal importance, and in terms of environmental practices.

The Green Strategies Program is part of the ALCC, but Garber credits Johnson with taking the lead starting it.

“Zach has had a vision for quite some time to promote our industry doing things in terms of its practices,” she says. “And promoting those (that are sustainable) to companies and clients.”

For the program, the first step was to create a blueprint for how to become a sustainable company, specific to Colorado. Johnson directed and facilitated the document into writing, and his involvement in the program earned him his second Person of the Year from the ALCC in 2015.

“I think it’s remarkable that Zach’s vision has actually resulted in building a wave of momentum within our industry and within our membership that really looks at and cares about sustainability,” Garber says. “It’s not just marketing; it’s serious. We want to do this. We want to do more and get this message out to our clients and help them understand it.”

**Out of the office**

Just because Johnson can’t be found in his office at CSU, doesn’t mean he’s not on the job. This fall he’ll be traveling to Costa Rica to help students work on a project to design wetlands that help clean up water.

“Costa Rica has a reputation as a pristine place,” he says. “(But) the water just gets drained out to small streams.” They plan to clean up that water by designing simple wetlands so it’s done sustainably.

The university also sends him to different campuses around the world, including one being built in Mexico.

Johnson says he loves to travel, and his family – including his wife, Ellen, 13-year-old daughter, Juno, and 11-year-old son, Leo, – travel a lot. He’s also an avid cyclist, something which connects him to the environment he cares about so much.

“I was in New Zealand and took my bicycle down there,” he says. “It’s amazing, you see things so much differently. When you’re in a car it’s one speed, but a bike is a different speed.”

Fefes says that his travels serve a double purpose: work and the thrill of showing his kids other cultures.

“Until you get to know him, you don’t know how deep he really runs. It’s really impressive,” she says.

Garber agrees.

“It’s just been great to be on the sidelines and watch him develop from the young designer who is learning the ropes to now being this imminent person within the university and the industry,” she says.

“We don’t often get to see that: someone cross all those lines in their career.”
Although Larry Ryan doesn’t own most of his company, he still puts his entire heart into the operation. **By Katie Tuttle**
Most people will say that the best jobs they had were the ones where their boss, CEO, owner and other higher ups knew them and took the time to make them feel like a part of the work family.

This can be said about Larry Ryan, founder of Ryan Lawn & Tree. “Most people who were around the office felt very free to pop in and say something to Larry,” says Chris Senske, president of Senske Services, who visited Ryan’s company for business reasons. “And it didn’t matter whether it was a manager or a service technician, a field person or office person. He knew them all by name, which I think is awesome.”

Started by Ryan in 1987, Ryan Lawn & Tree has a unique setup in that it’s now an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP).

“If you told me 29 years ago that we’d have this today, I would not believe it,” Ryan says. Ryan says the idea to have the ESOP came from his bank. One of the employees told him how they owned part of the bank, and he decided to look into it. Previously, Ryan Lawn & Tree had shared profits in a similar situation with its employees, but Ryan liked the idea of giving more to his team.

“They were growing the company so shouldn’t they share the rewards?” he says. Every year, employees are given stock based on profitability. As the current owners, Ryan and his wife had to sell off part of the company, which they did at a time when it was small enough that shares didn’t cost much.

At one point, the Ryans sold $3 million of the company to their more than 240 employees for the price of $1 million. The couple then donated part of that money to local charities.

As an ESOP, the majority of the company is owned by its employees. Ryan and his wife own 40 percent.

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In company meetings and in day-to-day activities, the associates come up with ideas to make the company better. They also work together to plan their days, maintain and purchase equipment, and brainstorm how to solve problems for upset clients.

Those ideas are helping. Ryan says they expect the company to reach $100 million by 2030 through both organic growth and acquisitions of other companies.

About the team

Focusing on employee needs is something Ryan does a lot of.

“My wife’s and my goal is to not get rich out of this deal,” he says. “It’s to create an environment where our employees turn into owners of the company.” He likens it to a farmer passing on the family farm to his children.

Ryan does admit that it’s not always a perfect setup to no longer fully own his company.

“I don’t want this to sound like utopia,” he says. “It’s incredible, but every day I have to realize I’m losing control of the company. So you have to work with that side of yourself. Are you really willing to live being the giver?”

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Those ideas are helping. Ryan says they expect the company to reach $100 million by 2030 through both organic growth and acquisitions of other companies.

“Most people will say that the best jobs they had were the ones where their boss, CEO, owner and other higher ups knew them and took the time to make them feel like a part of the work family.”
this job, and that it’s a way to start a career.

“Theyir job will grow. Their salary will grow. There’s a future for them,” he says.

And a future in the business for his employees is something he strives to nurture.

“Every single person has got to believe in what we do and who we are,” he says. “That is better than any training you can do.”

Training is important, which is why Ryan Lawn & Tree has a training center with a coordinator to handle all the training requirements for new and current crew members.

However, Ryan says a good employee starts with the hiring process.

“Selecting the right people is a huge part of the whole equation,” he says. “We spend a lot of time selecting the right people.”

But according to Senske, it’s not just about selecting the right people. Ryan also puts in an extra effort to build relationships with employees.

“He knows all his employees and all of the things going on in their lives,” Senske says. “There wasn’t a single one we bumped into that he didn’t ask about a wife, or somebody’s surgery or how they’re healing after an injury. That kind of thing.”

When Ryan says “selecting the right people,” he’s not just talking about new hires. Ryan Lawn & Tree also does a number of acquisitions, which is important for him because those companies’ employees become Ryan Lawn & Tree owners.

“At the end of the day, every single associate becomes the face of Ryan,” he says. “If a person doesn’t fit, there is not magic.”

Before acquiring a company, Ryan makes sure the current owner and employees are willing to continue operating under the Ryan Lawn & Tree format. After an acquired company joins Ryan, he tries to visit that new branch frequently.

“Branch visits are very important. You can’t visit a branch two times a year and have the associates in the branch understand who you are, have your values or get your culture,” he says. “Visits need to be frequent and the newly acquired associates need to see your sincerity.”

Thomas Tolkacz, CEO and owner of Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care, says Ryan has a passion for the industry, but it might be trumped by his passion for those in it.

“I think behind this person, who is sincerely dedicated to the green industry from a horticultural standpoint, there is a very intuitive, well read, sharp, driven, savvy business person who likes to be a winner, he says.

“It is rare you find someone who, I think, has combined their avocation and their vocation so closely together, not only to their own personal success and benefit, but to the team members and community.”

This job

Because he’s not technically a majority owner of the company, Ryan could easily spend the majority of his time outside of the office, managing from afar.

He doesn’t, however, instead choosing to be immersed in the company culture with his employees.

His day typically starts at a branch, where he’ll take time to talk to the crews and see how they’re doing. His hands-on approach continues as he usually will then ride with one of the technicians for the day, keeping his finger on the pulse of the company as he’s out in the field, experiencing what the crews are doing.

The rest of his day is spent reading articles and talking with different people to figure out who Ryan Lawn & Tree is and where the company is going.

“The real key ingredient, I think, is the passion for the business and the compassion for employees,” Senske says. “And building that business based on sharing and everybody participating.”

Although Ryan can’t take all the credit for himself, it’s safe to say he plays a large role in how Ryan Lawn & Tree impacts the industry.

“We have been so blessed for 29 years,” he says. “We work every day to try to be a role model company.”

“We know we can’t change the industry or other companies,” he says. “If we put all our energy into the Ryan organization, we have a chance to affect some change. The first words in our mission statement are ‘Serve God.’

“We only do this when our people feel good about what they do, take those good feelings to our clients, and at the end of the year, get pay checks that allow them to live a worthwhile life.”

“I’m an encourager. One of my jobs that I feel very strongly for is to encourage the people who join us. To thank them.”

Larry Ryan, founder, Ryan Lawn & Tree

More than 30 of the company’s associates have more than $100,000 of value in Ryan Lawn & Tree.
HEN BURDENSOME RULES and regulations hit the New York legislature, Larry Wilson is the man to call. For the past 16 years, Wilson has worked tirelessly to fight legislation that would harm or hinder green industry companies, and he’s had great success.

A late start

Wilson did some landscape work in college, but he never really thought of a career in the industry. He eventually went on to own a wine store, but after he turned 40, he decided he wanted a career change.

When Wilson’s father-in-law asked him to watch his business, Lawrence Landscape Design, while he dealt with an illness, Wilson agreed and realized he loved it. So in 1990, when his father-in-law retired, Wilson took over the business.

“I wanted to express myself,” he says. “I never really thought of doing that through horticulture but it soon became a passion for me. I enjoy seeing my work and I enjoyed making mistakes because I made a lot of mistakes and it was very enlightening to me.”

Wilson says he suffered from a lack of confidence when he was first starting out, but through the New York State Turf and Landscape Association, he learned how to succeed.

“I would be nowhere without them,” he says. “They taught me everything I need to know.”

He says that through his positions as first director, then vice president and then president, he gained the confidence he needed to feel comfortable speaking with other people, writing communication and running his business in lower Westchester County.

A taste for politics

Wilson became president of the New York State Turf and Landscape Association in 1997 but really got passionate about green industry politics in 2000 when the state of New York passed the Neighbor Notifica-
tion Law, requiring applicators to post notifications and notify neighboring properties when applying down pesticides in participating counties.

“We knew there would be more coming our way and the industry all of a sudden said, ‘We need to get together here. We need to be unified,’ at the time and I was sort of a facilitator,” he says. He called the right people, organized meetings and started the fight against crippling legislation.

Elizabeth Seme, executive director of the New York State Turfgrass Association, has worked with Wilson on legislative issues for more than 20 years and says that no one works harder than he does. By keeping up to date with issues, keeping industry members informed and involved, raising funds and making the right strategic moves, she says he’s a uniting force lobbying for lawn and landscape operators.

“He made good inroads, he communicated and he started to compile all of this and use his connections and his influence to kind of pull the state together,” she says. “And he’s been able to do it, with help, of course. He keeps us moving in the right direction. And I think we’ve even gotten stronger in the last five or six years.”

Wilson brought together 12 different trade organizations through the New York Alliance of Environmental Concerns, where he serves as chairman, and started making great progress on the legislative front. Wilson’s area is a hotbed for legislative activity and so he was on the forefront of the action. He says he didn’t expect to be the leader, but when he was asked, he stepped up to the plate.

“We were basically angry,” he says. “We were angry we were really being ignored by the legislature. They would ignore our story and they couldn’t care less about passing laws. They were listening to those that knew nothing about what we do and that still aggravates me a great deal. Being so well educated, it was disconcerting to me to hear someone telling me that we didn’t know what we were doing. That was a great motivating factor to get involved in the legislature.”

And thanks to his efforts, the organizations have been working together for years. By staying on top of the issues, taking the time to effectively communicate and fight legislation pesticide issues, applicator fees, applicator reporting, pesticide use, fertilizer regulation and more.

“The biggest thing is that under his leadership we’ve main-
tained a communication base within the government and regulatory arenas of the state and we have either stopped legislation from coming through or lessened the impact of it or in some cases, we were able to get some of our own agenda items through so that’s a pretty big statement right there,” Seme says.

Continuing the fight
Now, at the age of 68, Wilson is still as passionate about his work as chair of the New York Alliance for Environmental Concerns. “If I don’t stay on the cutting edge, I’m going to go over it. And I do sometimes fall asleep at night on the computer doing my job and helping others do their jobs,” he says. “I’m proud of the fact that I’ve stopped 16 years of onerous legislation.”

He does it to defend the best interests of businesses in the state of New York, particularly because New York is such a bellwether state for pesticide legislation. And he has plenty of work to keep him busy. Right now, there are more than 100 bills in the legislature dealing with the application, storage, use and transportation of pesticides.

“As a volunteer, you do not see anybody that is more tenacious, dedicated and loyal to an industry than Larry,” Seme says.

Through the New York State Turf and Landscape Alliance, Wilson helps organize all kinds of seminars and educational sessions for applicators since the state of New York’s applicator licenses require continuing education credits.

Working with Cornell University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Massachusetts and others, the organization works hard to make sure those credits are available.

Even after many successes in his years fighting for the lawn and landscape industry, Wilson still gets fired up at the current state of politics in his sector.

“When I see people walk in and tell us how to do our jobs and tell us what we’re doing wrong without the basis of any experience, without even knowing the challenges that we face and how we work, that still aggravates me,” he says.

The end of the year
Wilson’s favorite part of the year is when the legislature closes and he can take a look back at what he and his colleagues have been able to accomplish and spend more time on his own business.

He’s an avid skier, bicyclist and reader, making sure he sneaks at least a half hour or 45 minutes of reading in before bed. And when he can, he loves to spend time with his wife, JoAnne, his daughter, Christina, and his son, James.

But the closing of the New York legislature isn’t the end of Wilson’s duties. Besides running his own business, he also serves as vice chair of the Westchester Parks Recreational Conservation Board and president of the Hyatt Community Association, and he continues to be active with GREENPAC, the New York state green industry political action committee he helped establish in 2006.

“I think the fact that he’s been able to stay in this and continue on and people trust him and follow him is a huge compliment to his abilities,” Seme says. “He holds everything all together and it’s not an easy industry. It’s a tough game, it really is, and yet he’s withstood the test of time.”

“When I see people walk in and tell us how to do our jobs and tell us what we’re doing wrong without the basis of any experience, without even knowing the challenges that we face and how we work, that still aggravates me.”

Larry Wilson, owner, Lawrence Landscape

When he isn’t fighting legislation, Wilson is an avid skier, bicyclist, and reader.
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Stephanie Schwenke
Turf Market Manager
Syngenta Lawn and Garden

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He may have just been hitting puberty, but 12-year-old Chris Davitt had no trouble hitting his prospecting goals. Actually, he was exceeding his goals. By a lot.

The pre-teen and other neighborhood kids were tasked with handing out fliers advertising then 18-year-old Craig Ruppert’s upstart lawn mowing business. “We had, like, six of us in the back of the pickup truck,” says Davitt, now 55, who retired as president from Ruppert Landscape based in Laytonsville, Md., in 2014 after 34 years with the company. “Craig would let us off on the sides of the street and then he would pick us up a few blocks later and take us to the next neighborhood.

“Well, we all had to count our fliers. And between some of these sessions, Craig would get me up in the cab and say, ‘You delivered 263. The next guy delivered 180. Keep going.’ And these other guys didn’t know why I was running and just trying to deliver two for their every one.”

Chris Davitt never graduated college, but he was a guiding force behind the success of Ruppert Landscape.

By Brian Horn
But to Davitt, whose older brother was friends with Ruppert and mowed with the group, it was a no-brainer: He was in control of how well he could do something. That type of drive was something Ruppert noticed right away.

“Part of the reason I invited Chris to come was I wanted to set the base for these other guys,” Ruppert says. “So, Chris was jogging or running to get it done because he wanted it. That’s just one little early example of Chris’ hustle.”

To Davitt, who still serves as an advisor for the company, those early trips with Ruppert and the other kids set the tone for the culture that drove Ruppert to success.

“Thinking back on it, we were going to outwork everyone,” Davitt says. “That was our strategic plan, but perhaps we didn’t know what a strategic plan was. And what Craig would do is make hard work and the dirtiest of the jobs sort of honorable. If you outworked someone and you got dirtier than they did, then that was a real badge of honor.”

BAD FIRST IMPRESSION. Bob Jones, vice president of Ruppert Companies, has a great respect and appreciation for Davitt. But that wasn’t the case the first time the two met. Or the second or third time.

Hailing from Ohio and getting his green industry start in the Buckeye state, Jones decided to take a job as a division manager at a landscaping company in Philadelphia. But after seven months, that didn’t work out, and going back to Ohio wasn’t an option.

“I’m kind of a proud person and didn’t want to go back to Ohio with my tail between my legs and ask for my job back,” he says. So he took a job at Ruppert as an assistant foreman — a job below Jones’ skill level and one with hefty paycut.

Jones eventually worked his way to a promotion, but didn’t get the raise he was promised. Davitt told Jones he was getting paid more than he should, and if the promotion failed, Davitt wanted to move him back into his old role. That didn’t sit well with Jones.

“I thought, ‘Who was this guy telling me that I’m getting paid too much?’ So, for the first four years of my employment at Ruppert, I didn’t like Chris very much — maybe because I thought he was undervaluing...
me and didn’t appreciate what I was capable of doing,” Jones says. “Chris always thought I was a field guy.”

Jones says he eventually became close with Davitt when the two moved over to Ruppert Nursery in 1999 after TruGreen Landcare bought Ruppert Landscape. “We joke about it these days,” Jones says. “I just didn’t like him, but for the wrong reasons.”

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES. But the situation Jones describes is something Davitt admits was a problem in his early days as a leader. He was quick to give up on people if they didn’t fit a position perfectly.

“You see there being one way to do things, perhaps you put people into categories of this person doesn’t get it because they’re not approaching it the way I would,” Davitt says. “I think there are people perhaps I couldn’t reach earlier in my career because things were too absolute for me. And over time, you get tolerance and you get understanding, like, ‘You know, I didn’t think that was going to work. And I didn’t think that person had it.’ And, in fact, they did.”

Davitt says it was a move away from this type of management style that allowed the company to grow. The leadership team began attending Dale Carnegie management courses, and they brought on a consultant to help.

The consultant, Clyde Vadner, drilled home that communication is the responsibility of the sender. Davitt came from the perspective of “I told the person. They should have gotten it,” he says. Vadner, who had a merit award named after him at Ruppert, countered that if they didn’t get it, then it was Davitt’s fault.

“Initially it was, ‘Get out of here. I’ll tell ya whose fault it is,’” Davitt says now with a laugh. In the late 1980s, the company began to track turnover, and to Davitt’s surprise, people didn’t always leave because they couldn’t hack it.

“In the early 80s, when you were turning over people, you thought you were working hard because it meant you were setting a high standard,” he says. “But in fact you’re setting a high standard and you’re not doing a good job as a manager if you’re turning a lot of people over.”

Though the company did begin to focus on systems to help guide employees, it was leadership’s overall shift in managing that allowed them to jump from a company pulling in a few million dollars to one opening branches, resulting in new revenue streams.

“We couldn’t have crossed that hurdle without really understanding management, trusting people, developing people, and everything that goes with that,” Davitt says. Eventually, even Jones began to see Davitt as a strong leader.

“The best managers and the people who excel the most run to conflict, run to the hard issues, versus trying to avoid them,” Jones says. “If there was a tough issue, Chris was generally in the middle of it trying to figure it out.”

Jones grew so close to Davitt, he even sought him out for work and life advice. “We used to call him the Ann Landers of landscaping,” he says. “Chris had a great way of looking at everything and still does.”

Davitt (front row, second from right) with his team during an early 1980s Ruppert Field Day competition.
When it comes to being a strong leader, it’s not only important to give direction, but to also lead by example. That rings true for Kristen Fefes.

“We preach the value of industry certification,” says Becky Garber, Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (ALCC) director of communication. “Kristen, as a true professional, went out and earned the certification for people who run associations. She made the effort to do it and I think that says a lot about her and her commitment to professionalism and doing herself what we preach.”
Fefes joined the ALCC in 1999 as the assistant executive director. Prior to that, she’d been working at Selz/Seabolt Communications in Washington, D.C., after she graduated from Catholic University in 1992.

After seven years there, she was ready to leave Washington and head back to her native Denver, although she wanted to stay in the trade association world.

“(The) concept of people coming together in a volunteer capacity to make an industry better and to make standards; I had really enjoyed that,” she says. “I wanted to stay in that.”

Although she had no previous experience in the landscape industry, she called herself “lucky” for finding the open position with the ALCC.

“I think that’s one of the fun things about working for associations,” she says. “Is that you quickly learn how to talk about the important things that matter. You learn the lingo of horticulture.”

A year after starting, the ALCC longtime executive director resigned and Fefes became the acting director. In October of 2001, she was named Executive Director.

“The thing I’ve always found fascinating about Kristen,” says Dean Murphy, president of Terracare Associates and past president of ALCC for 2014, “is she can do anything she wanted, she’s that talented. I’ve always found it interesting that she chose this industry to be part of. It’s because she likes it.”

And it’s her love of the industry that plays a role in the work she does with ALCC.

“She really gives back to the industry, and puts her heart and soul into what she does,” says Sandy Munley, OLA executive director. “She’s definitely one of the leaders in the industry on the association side of things.”

When asked about the best and worst advice she’d ever been given, Fefes had a list. The advice ranged from things told to her by family members and peers in the industry, and it’s obvious that she follows all of them in her daily life.

ALWAYS KNOW WHAT YOU WANT OUT OF A MEETING. “If you asked my husband what I did all day, he’d say go to meetings,” Fefes says. And though she’s joking, her day is packed with them. From January through May, the Colorado legislature is in session.

She’s part of an umbrella organization in Colorado called GreenCO (The Green Industries of Colorado). It brings together seven green industries (landscape contractors, nursery, garden center, sod growers, lawn care, landscape architects and arborists), and helps them collaborate on legislative and regulatory issues.

She’s also part of ProGreen Expo, which is the largest green industry conference in the Rocky Mountain Region. It is presented by a group of organizations, including ALCC.

At each of her meetings, Fefes makes sure the focus stays on the people she represents in the association, but she also puts focus on the industry as a whole.

“It’s not just about Colorado for her,” Garber says. “It’s about how can we throw our weight as an association into something that is impactful at a national level that does come back to our members?”

THE THING I’VE ALWAYS FOUND FASCINATING ABOUT KRISTEN IS SHE CAN DO ANYTHING SHE WANTED, SHE’S THAT TALENTED, I’VE ALWAYS FOUND IT INTERESTING THAT SHE CHOSE THIS INDUSTRY TO BE PART OF. IT’S BECAUSE SHE LIKES IT.”

DEAN MURPHY, PRESIDENT, TERRACARE ASSOCIATES AND PAST PRESIDENT OF ALCC
Fefes travels to Washington almost every year, advocating for the industry at NALP’s Legislative Day on the Hill. She also lobbies at the statehouse for things important to the industry in Colorado, including H-2B and pesticide regulations.

“It’s your job to advocate for the industry and represent them,” Fefes says. “You quickly learn how to talk about the important things that matter.”

LISTENING IS A LEARNED SKILL, NOT AN INNATE ONE – ANYONE CAN DO IT WITH PRACTICE. “She’s very reasonable about listening to someone else and their position,” Murphy says. “Intellect has nothing to do with what you know, it’s more based on what you ask. People who ask the best questions are the best people to deal with, and she’s one of those people.”

Fefes says some of the best parts of board meetings are when everyone’s talking before the meeting gets started.

“That’s how I learn,” she says. “Open your eyes to the nuances.”

A good listener doesn’t listen to the loudest talkers in the room, and Fefes is certainly a good listener.

“She’s equally attentive to the leader of a huge company as she is to a young person getting started out and trying to make a place in the industry,” Garber says. “I think that speaks volumes. Kristen makes time for everyone, and we’re here to serve everyone.”

YOU GREW BECAUSE OF SOMEONE. HELP SOMEONE GROW BECAUSE OF YOU. Fefes has done a lot to help the industry, but it’s more the manner of how she’s done it that affects people so much. Being available and willing to help others is what helps someone stand out in a crowd.

“I think she’s just a dynamic leader who’s very thoughtful and very easy to work with because she is so thoughtful and always makes sure to be very inclusive to people,” says Munley.

In fact, Fefes has stood out so much, many of her industry peers feel she’s helped make their jobs better.

“We love Kristen. When she leaves, we may have to follow because we love working with her so much,” says Garber, talking about what she and another coworker tell applicants when they ask about the association in interviews. “That’s the truth and we have told countless applicants that. That’s just what resonates with us; how much we admire her and appreciate her.”

Murphy agrees.

“She’s on my short list of people I’d trust with anything,” he says. “We talk all the time about anything that happened where we lose her would be a step down.”

YOU CAN’T GOVERN WITHOUT THE WILL OF THE GOVERNED. After taking over the role of Executive Director, Fefes put an emphasis on teamwork within the association, something she feels associations should be about.

“You’ve got to create the two-way communication,” Fefes says. “It’s not about one person’s agenda. Nobody in my position can do their job without the membership. Associations are so interesting because the shareholders, the customers and the workforce are all the same people. We really can’t do our jobs without them, and I feel lucky that I wouldn’t want to. That’s what makes our work fun; what makes my work fun.”

YOU’LL BE AMAZED AT WHAT 10 MINUTES OUTSIDE EVERY DAY WILL DO FOR YOUR DISPOSITION. Living in Colorado, where there are over 300 days of sun each year, Fefes finds a lot of time to spend outdoors. When she’s not in the office or at meetings, she can be found hiking or riding bikes with her husband, Dimitri, and her two sons, ages four and five.

“My five-year-old can actually ride his bike now,” she says. “So that’s one less person in the Burley that I have to pull.”

Fefes and her husband are both avid skiers, so her hope is to start skiing again when her sons get old enough. But even if it doesn’t involve the outdoors, Fefes is almost constantly active in her free time.

“I’m an early morning exercise person,” she says. “I feel like I’m in on a secret when I’m awake and the rest of the house isn’t.”
Mark Utendorf helps the industry thrive by gathering knowledge and sharing it with everyone he can. By Kate Spirgen

There’s always more to learn in the lawn care industry, and Mark Utendorf wants to know it all.

“It’s odd, even now, after doing it all these years, I’m shocked that I’m not finished,” says the owner of Emerald Lawn Care in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. “I keep thinking at some point I’ll get to a point where I’ve got it all figured out and I just never get there.”

Utendorf bought Emerald eight years ago and jumped headfirst into the business.

Attending as many educational sessions and industry events as he could, he was shocked by how open and welcoming his new colleagues were. At his first conference, Utendorf met Harold Enger, director of education at Spring-Green, and even though the two are direct competitors, they talked shop.

“So many people don’t think that it’s necessary to go on and get education or attend these different meetings, but Mark was there right from the beginning to learn about the industry,” Enger says.
That attitude and his collaborative spirit made him stand out right away. When Enger, Bill Leuenberger of Chalet Landscape Nursery and Garden Center and Scott Roberts of TruGreen first formed the Illinois Professional Lawn Care Association, Utendorf was one of the founding members and one of the first presidents.

“I could tell right away that he was going to be great,” Enger says. “He did an excellent job (as president). He was very much involved. He was really interested in how things work, talking to other lawn care companies, getting us all together. That was his main focus.”

And Utendorf is willing to give as much as he gets. He currently serves as the group’s legislative/regulation chairman, advocating for the industry. While he says that he’s a relative newbie to the industry, he’s sharing what he learns.

“He makes himself available and you don’t have to push any buttons,” says Norm Kleber, IPLCA education chairman. “He’s automatically there. If you need something, if an issue comes up, he’s right on top of it and lets our membership know. And he’s very good at networking with other individuals in the industry and I think that’s what sets him apart.”

**PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARK UTENDORF**

**IN HIS COMPANY, HE LEADS BY EXAMPLE, AND I THINK THAT’S WHAT MAKES HIM SO SUCCESSFUL.**

NORM KLEBER, IPLCA EDUCATION CHAIRMAN
Mark Utendorf recognizes that every company is having the same problems, no matter which state it’s in, says Norm Kleber, education chairman for the IPLCA. Utendorf has been very involved in the neonicotinoid controversy, among other issues, going to bat for the green industry in D.C.

“I think I could see the fire in his eyes when (NALP Director of Government Affairs) Tom Delaney and a few others started pushing the issue a few years ago about the neo-nics and how our industry was getting attacked from all angles. And he just took passionately a call to arms,” Kleber says.

Utendorf says the collaborative spirit of the industry is one of the things he loves most about lawn care. “I’ve never been in an industry that was as open as this industry and it still blows me away. It just encourages me to be that much more engaged.”

When Utendorf built the website for Emerald Lawn Care, the first thing on it was information on cultural practices. Even his business card is educational, describing ideal mowing heights and tips for a beautiful lawn.

The goal is healthy turf and happy customers for all, not just Emerald Lawn Care, and that passion has really made Utendorf stand out.

“He has renewed my own faith in the industry in the sense that I see this younger guy, this upcoming person who really is excited about this industry and it’s not just because he can make money at it, but because he sees the benefits,” says Harold Enger, director of education at Spring-Green.
Bruce Wilson started in the industry like most – he mowed lawns as a kid to make some extra money around his upstate New York home. One of his former clients, who’d hired Wilson to maintain his small greenhouse, recommended the budding horticulturist for a garden club scholarship. Wilson got it, and it led him to SUNY Farmingdale. He transferred to Cornell, where he graduated with a horticulture degree.

After graduating, he got a job at another tree company, climbing trees in the brutal Rye, N.Y. winters. His wife, Gail, thought that was a bit too dangerous. They decided that if his career would be in landscaping, it made sense to move somewhere where he could work full time. So Wilson answered a classified ad and was hired as a spray operator at Green Valley Landscaping in sunny San Jose, Calif.

It was 1971. He was 25 years old, and at the start of a career that would see him run the largest landscape company in the world, establish maintenance as the green industry’s dominant service, and hire, train and consult with dozens of people who would become standout leaders and successful business owners in their own right.
GREEN VALLEY. Wilson started his days early – afternoon winds in the Bay area made it hard to spray – so he had a few hours to kill each afternoon at the shop before his wife picked him up after work. So he asked his boss, Joe Marsh, if he could learn more about the other work Green Valley did.

“I got to see all the jobs we did, met all the foremen and managers and got to learn the operation pretty fast,” he says.

That same year, ValleyCrest, which at the time was mainly a construction company, acquired Green Valley to start a maintenance division. Burt Sperber asked Wilson to head to Colorado to open a branch office there, and acted as the branch manager, salesperson, mower operator and mechanic.

Then began a series of promotions that would ultimately make Wilson the president of Environmental Care, ValleyCrest’s maintenance division, and put him in a position to lead and teach some of the industry’s greatest luminaries.

When Wilson became president, it had just four branches – in San Diego, Las Vegas, Denver and Phoenix – plus Green Valley, doing about $7 million. “That’s what we had, then we grew from there,” Wilson says.

“Grew it from there” is a bit of an understatement. By the time Wilson retired in 1999, ValleyCrest was doing $140 million a year and had grown to that level almost entirely organically. Wilson had made just one acquisition worth more than $5 million – the Oyler Brothers in Florida.

“We never planned to be a $100 million company. We just grew,” Wilson says. “We budgeted to grow every year, but we didn’t really realize the compounding effect of it. The only thing that was holding us back from growing even more was people.”

And it was with people where Wilson truly excelled. He spent most of his time out of the office, visiting with branch managers across the state and then country, listening to what their problems were and spreading knowledge of what was working elsewhere.

One of Wilson’s hires was Tom Fochtman, who would go on to run CoCal Landscape (and compete with his former boss) in the Denver market. As vice president of sales and marketing, where he would visit branches throughout California with Wilson.

“He gave me plenty of direction and a lot of autonomy,” Fochtman says. “We had a lot of quality time driving to Palm Desert. I’m confident and I have an ego – he was good at showing me how to keep that in check and how to empower people.”

CONSULTING. After growing ValleyCrest to nine-digit revenue, Wilson could have retired. But he got a call from Rich Angelo, the founder of Stay Green in Santa Clarita, Calif. He hired ValleyCrest to do the tree work on his own maintenance accounts, and after he’d heard that Wilson retired, asked him if he’d come consult with his company.


He teamed up with Tom Oyler, who had joined ValleyCrest after the acquisition, and the two formed the Wilson-Oyler group. It was then that Wilson got involved with peer groups, facilitating meetings among similar-sized but non-competing landscapers around the country.

Wilson didn’t invent peer groups, but he started the most successful ones in the industry. He now runs eight groups, and can count among his clients some of the largest

**FRANK MARIANI, MARIANI LANDSCAPE**
FROM MANAGER TO ENABLER

M y most influential mentor is Joe Trickett, Ph.D., the Dean of the graduate school of business at Santa Clara University. He had a student that we hired to do his thesis on our company, and an attitude survey of our field employees and why they stayed with us for years doing what was – and is – perceived as a menial job.

During the process of his verifying if this was a legitimate project, he met with me regularly and we developed a bond. He took a liking to me and we got into numerous philosophical conversations about management. His area of expertise was industrial psychology. One day when he came in he asked me how things were going. We had a problem where some in the company wanted to fire a guy and some did not.

To make this a short story, it came down to what I believed: Did I believe that people got a job to screw up and get fired, or did they want to succeed in some way? I chose succeed. He asked me if I liked being managed. I didn’t, but knew that was part of the deal.

He convinced me to think about instead of being a manager to be an enabler. From that point forward, I saw my role as enabling people to attain the success they wanted. It worked. I enabled many people to achieve more than their dreams.

One of those clients and friends is Frank Mariani, who was a member of Wilson’s first peer group, Next Level Network, and has hired him as a private consultant for Mariani Landscape. He says Wilson’s best skill is his ability to manage the sometimes-inflated egos of the owners who hire him.

“I think that too many of us believe our own bullshit, excuse my French. He’s not afraid to pop our bubbles. … He’ll call a spade a spade,” Mariani says.

“He’s going to give you an answer – to me that is invaluable. You can’t put a price tag on that, because I trust him completely. That’s not to say he’s always right, but I’d be hard pressed to tell you a time he was wrong.”

As a consultant, Wilson helped Mariani improve how it ran its residential maintenance business. He analyzed everything from how crews rolled out in the morning to how the yard was organized to how job sites were set up.

“He was there as early as the earliest guy the next morning. He said, ‘I don’t want you to pick me up at the hotel. I want to see what’s going on,’” says Fred Wacker, Mariani’s president. “He was in our yard at a quarter of six, watching people. He just has an energy level that is inspiring and motivating.”

Bob Grover, president at Pacific Landscape Management in Oregon, is another member of Next Level Network, and says Wilson’s great skill is listening more than he talks.

“No disrespect to anybody companies and biggest names in landscaping.

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Bob Grover, president at Pacific Landscape Management in Oregon, is another member of Next Level Network, and says Wilson’s great skill is listening more than he talks.

“No disrespect to anybody else, but there are some very large personalities in our industry,” Grover says. “And I think he is smarter than any of those large personalities. The thing about Bruce that impresses me the most ... he listens. He is one of the best listeners I know because he’s not trying to command the conversation. He truly wants to know what other people are saying and...
A Supplement To
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Laurie Riggs
Lawn Care Market Manager
Syngenta Lawn and Garden

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Martha Hill isn’t angry, just a little annoyed. She recently had two students ready to enter her Landscape Management program at Hinds Community College, but then they changed their minds. She can handle kids having a change of heart, but these particular students were talked out of enrolling in the program by their parents.

“I knew that was out there, but that has hit me in the face twice in one week and I am frustrated,” she says of the anti-landscaping sentiment.

The change of heart is something Hill, and the green industry as a whole, has to deal with. Mom and Dad don’t see landscaping as a career, but as a part-time job you do while you prepare for your “real job.” But after almost 30 years in education, Hill isn’t going to let a few misguided parents kill the passion she has for the industry. If she had the chance to speak with the parents, she’d lay out valid reasons why their son or daughter should consider a career in the industry.

“I would tell them that our program doesn’t train a student to be a laborer, it trains a student to be a manager, and ultimately an owner of a business if that’s what their desire is,” she says.

After she made her hypothetical case, along with what she could tell them about her role on the board of PLANET’s Academic Excellence Foundation, there’s a good chance Hill’s passion would have the parents trumpeting the industry on their own.

“Every semester she seems to take one or more students under her wing,” says Allen Spence, a small engine and equipment repair instructor at Hinds. “Some of the students have life situations outside of school that can affect their studies. She is always encouraging these students to continue their education. She gives of herself way beyond just being a teacher.”

That means assisting students with finding scholarships, helping them find part-time jobs and just being there when they need to talk to someone.

“She sits down with every student to determine what is the best educational plan
Some of the students have life situations outside of school that can affect their studies. She is always encouraging these students to continue their education. She gives of herself way beyond just being a teacher,” says Allen Spence, an instructor at Hinds Community College.

THE BEGINNING. Hailing from a “really small town” in southwest Mississippi (Bude, Miss., population 1,037) Hill grew up with a father who had a garden “until the day he died, and my grandmother and my aunt lived together and they always had something blooming in their yard, as my mother did also.” Hill would visit her grandmother every weekend, and while her dad was working in different gardens, she would help herself to some of the beautiful plants at the house.

“I would get out of the car, walk around the yard and look to see what was blooming so that I could pick a bouquet at the end of the day and take it home and enjoy it the next week,” she says. “That is something that I know influenced me in my career path.”

Fast forward a number of years, Hill enrolled in community college at Copiah-Lincoln Junior College. She wanted to major in forestry but was steered away from that because of the lack of jobs in the industry in the late 1970s, especially for women. After speaking with an adviser about the influence her dad and grandmother had on her, she looked at what Mississippi State (where she wanted to attend after community college) had to offer and settled on a landscape architecture major. While at Mississippi State, she co-oped with Brickman Group at the company’s Long Grove, Ill., and Philadelphia offices, which she called the best co-oping experience she could have had.

“That pretty much covered every facet of the industry because we had design/build, maintenance, arboriculture,” she says. “We had a nursery – and even a full-service vehicular mechanics staff. We were doing large commercial work and high-end residential work.”

Part of that experience was figuring out how to get heavy equipment into an area that didn’t have an entrance big enough to fit the equipment. That meant the girl from a little town in Mississippi was going to have to direct a crane operator located four stories below street level. Skid-steers, soil amendments and trees, were lifted over a wall into a large planter just off Michigan Avenue in the Windy City.

“That was an experience of a lifetime. It scared me to death, but gave me such confidence in my co-oping experience,” she says.

Hill eventually graduated from Mississippi State in 1983 and accepted a position at Richard C. Griffin and Associates, Landscape Architects in Jackson, Miss. But that would be a short stint before her true calling would find her.

CAREER CHANGE. Hill was with Robert C. Griffin for three happy years, but knew there would be no opportunities to move up in the company because there was only two other people ranked higher than her, one of which was the owner. She also had thoughts of starting a company with her husband, Donnie, who is a landscape contractor, but it just never worked out, she says.

It was around that time she was asked to be on an advisory committee to investigate the need for a two-year program in landscape maintenance at Hinds Community College. Through her time at Mississippi State, she had developed contacts with ALCA (now PLANET) and used the organization’s model curriculum as a basis of what Hinds could teach. After a year working on the committee, a friend who was also on the committee told Hill she should apply for the teaching position in the program. She initially shrugged off the suggestion, but then started to warm up to the idea.

“Looking back on it, through my life, I taught Sunday school, I taught Bible school, I taught swimming lessons, I was in the band and I taught band camps,” Hill says. “You know how you take those interest inventory tests early in your career? Well, each time I would take one, my results would come back ‘teacher.’ I just never really took that seriously.” She was hired in 1986 to lead the program, which was starting from scratch.

“We started out small, but we had to recruit students, we had to recruit companies
to hire our students,” Hill says. “And I hit the ground running.”

She was attending industry meetings and conferences in Baltimore and Alexandria, Va., and the week-long gap between those two stops was filled with visits to landscape companies, trying to find prospective employers for her future students.

“I visited nine companies in the D.C. area during that time,” she says. “I just wanted to start some communication with those folks and ask their advice and what did they want our students to know when they might go to work for their companies. I took my curriculum with me and said ‘Look over this curriculum; do you think it’s viable? Is this what we need to be teaching? Everybody put their stamp of approval on it. So it was a great way to introduce Hinds to them and get us on the radar, nationally, from the beginning.”

Since Hill had no education courses in her college coursework, she had to take summer classes at different universities in Mississippi to receive a teaching certificate.

Plus, another college located about 30 minutes away was also applying for a landscape management program at the same time. The director of that program was Bob Callaway, Hill’s advisor at Mississippi State University.

“Bob was an incredible mentor of mine,” Hill says. “You don’t know how many phone calls I had with him asking ‘Do you think I can do this, Bob,’ before I accepted the job here at Hinds. ‘Do you think I could teach this, do you think I could make it?’ And the whole time, he was also looking at getting into teaching at the community college level 30 minutes from us.

TIME TO TEACH. After all the hard work travelling, networking and taking classes, Hill found that recruiting students was the next important step. The first couple of years, the enrollment was low with about five kids taking part, but it gave Hill time to catch her breath. When she did, she was able to help a number of students succeed.

“If it wasn’t for me taking Martha’s program at Hinds Community College, I would not have been introduced to some industry leaders,” says David Pursell, who says Hill’s influence lead him to discover U.S. Lawns and buy a franchise. He started with two employees in 1998 and now has more than 30 people working under him. He’s also taught with Hill since 1998.

“She and I hosted Student Career Days at Hinds Community College,” he says. “This one event impacted at least 700 plus students and no telling how many other people in the green industry business.”

Aside from a couple students being lead astray by parents, Hill is optimistic about the future. Hinds is working closely with Mississippi State to make sure students transferring into landscape contracting have a smooth transition into university life. Students graduating from MSU’s landscape contracting and management program can take one additional business course and also have a minor in business administration. “That’s a great thing for a parent and a student to think about when they get to that point where they’re ready to either go to work, or transfer on and continue their education,” she says.

With the many graduates from the Hinds Community College Landscape Management Technology program through the years, Hill says landscaping programs and those in the industry need to do a better job of promoting success stories. With more promotion, maybe mom and dad won’t fear their kids joining the industry.

“We need those graduates,” she says, “and every member of the landscape contracting and management community to tell their story and help educators get the word out that you can have a rewarding, profitable career in the landscape industry.”
Gary Mallory doesn’t have a college degree. But that doesn’t mean his employees get a free pass to skip out on education.

It also doesn’t mean he’s at a loss for coming up with ways to motivate his employees and encourage them to grow as green industry professionals. He just picked up some of his strategy while learning the importance of working together while playing and coaching basketball.

Mallory, now CEO of Heads Up Landscaping in Albuquerque, New Mexico, started out with three friends in 1973 when he was one month clear of high school. Then the Heads Up Lawn Sprinkler Company, they spent the season installing sprinklers around town. By the end of the summer, Mallory and one of his partners bought out the other two for a total of $2,200, and branched into commercial irrigation and landscaping.

Mallory fell easily into the role of the salesman, though with only two employees, he didn’t have much choice. “I was the salesman, accountant, head laborer and trencher operator and warranty person,” he says. “I had a partner who was really quite good at all the technical aspects, so he would design everything as the craftsman. I’ve always gravitated toward customer service.”

The hard work paid off: The small business’s volume doubled every year for the first five years. Along with partner Greg Bouloy, Mallory hacked at the job throughout the week while he took courses to build toward his business degree. His Greek grandmother worked as their receptionist, answering the phone with a thick accent. The schedule was harrowing, and eventually, he just couldn’t keep up.

“I took all my classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” he says. “I’d go to work in the morning at 6 and get off at 7 at night, and I’d fall asleep in my night classes. I just couldn’t swing it anymore.”
With 116 hours of a 128-course-hour degree completed, Mallory called it quits to focus on the company.

“My grandmother, she cried for a week when I dropped out. She’s an immigrant, so the whole family was always taught to work hard and go to college and get a degree.”

COURT LESSONS. But Mallory had bigger plans than just giving up on a degree to cut lawns. As the company grew, he found being a part of a business tough work, but also very rewarding.

And with the addition of more employees, he discovered a knack for motivating his team, crossing over from his history playing basketball in high school.

“I really liked owning a business right off the bat,” Mallory says. “And I think just my passion for coaching and teambuilding and mentoring gets into everything I do. So with my children, my employees — there’s something about setting goals as a team and mentoring people and watching their abilities grow. It’s the most exciting thing to me.”

With more employees joining Heads Up (which got its name from the call up-court during a fast break in basketball) as it picked up steam, Mallory put programs in place to help build up his staff and support them in growing alongside the company.

The company pushes employees to go to college and work toward a degree, and helps finance the coursework. For Spanish-speaking employees, the company provides English-language courses.

“A FAMILY MAN. Mallory urges his employees to spend time with their families. He leads by example, reserving Saturdays for coaching soccer and basketball.

“In this industry, it’s easy to get wrapped up seasonally and just work,” he says. “Your kids only score their first goal once, and if you’re not there for that and you’re out working, what a tragedy. The family time should be scheduled and protected fiercely.”

He speaks from experience, after raising three children who live and work around the world with his wife of 37 years.

“I love my family,” he says. “It’s way more important to me to be a good husband and a good dad than to win a business award.”

Other initiatives are geared toward making Heads Up a rewarding place to work and keeping employees motivated. Once each week, Mallory tries to have lunch with an employee, as well as buy a gift card for the employee to bring his own family back later. When workers have children, he has a card ready for them. Occasionally, he’ll pass out movie tickets to the crews.

Once, they held a safety competition in which employees’ children made post-by-Mallory helped start the Next Level Peer Group, seen at right during one of their annual gatherings, a collection of like-minded landscapers focused on helping each other continue to develop and grow their own companies.
ers about staying safe on the job – they were supposed to choose one winner, but somehow all the children ended up with gift certificates.

During the holidays, there’s a slideshow roast of employees that people actually attempt to get on. And during the season, managers will sometimes hold cookouts, grilling hotdogs and hamburgers to be ready when their teams come back in from the field.

“We spend so much time at work,” Mallory says. “You ought to help people just as much as you can. And for any employees, I don’t want them to feel just like a number. I want them to feel valued and appreciated, so we do all kinds of things to boost people up.”

But building his team isn’t just about making the workplace inviting. It’s also taking the time to groom employees for promotions, and bringing in new recruits ready to head out into the field, he says.

“We have interns every year that we bring in. For our expansion plans, we need about three to four managers each year coming out of college. So we help pay for their housing and education,” he says. “We really like that program. Their energy – it’s just so great to work around them. We’re always trying to recruit young, college-educated people.

“We are constantly talking about stocking up the bullpen for the future. So in the short term, that costs us, but in the long term, we have a very strong farm team.”

Keeping new recruits coming in helps fuel expansion plans for Heads Up, but it also gives employees who have been around for a few jobs a chance to grow as managers. Managers are encouraged to train their replacements, which means employees have the opportunity to look upward for career growth.

“He’s not afraid to pay for talent and bringing in the best possible person for the job,” says Tom Fochtman, CEO of Ceibass Venture Partners, and former member of Mallory’s peer group. “But his preference would be to help his employee team grow. He would prefer that his staff grow into the next position, and the next position. Heads Up has invested in internal training and mentoring to help their people ascend to the top.”

Fochtman and that peer group of green industry business leaders are another part of Mallory’s plans to build teamwork. After visiting a roundtable discussion at an industry convention, Mallory was inspired to bring together other leaders to work through issues facing their companies, kicking off the Next Level Peer Group.

“Gary is one of the most genuine business owners I know and is committed to helping others, such as me, a peer group partner,” says Bob Grover, president at Pacific Landscape Management. “He has good perspective, cares about what his company does beyond making a profit as is always looking for ways to improve.”

Part of pushing for that development is urging those leaders to make progress on what’s holding them back without making excuses, says Fochtman.

“He did not settle for average and would not allow you to do either. If you came back to the next meeting with the same issue, he rolled his sleeves up and said, ‘Let’s figure this out,’” Fochtman says. “If I have an issue, an idea, a problem or concern, Gary is one of the folks I call to vet it out. He’s a great sounding board. Once we narrow it down, he’s extremely encouraging going forward.”

Mallory would rather promote from within instead of looking outside the company for open positions. To encourage a deep bench, Heads Up runs an internship program to recruit young, college-educated workers.
When Richard Restuccia started talking about water management in the 1980s, people were a lot more interested in pumping costs and power than they were in the actual water. But as drought hits the country and environmentalism gains popularity, the green industry is starting to think about smart water management.

Restuccia has a joke that he uses a lot as a speaker. “I say, ‘I’ve been talking about water management and sustainability for 17 years and I’m no more interesting today than I was 17 years ago.’ But people are calling me a lot more and wanting to hear what I have to say and I think it’s just because people are waking up to the water situation and the awareness is getting bigger,” he says.

Growing up in the desert of Arizona, Restuccia loved heading out to the desert lakes for skiing, swimming and fishing. Now living in the San Diego area, he loves to surf and swim, and spends weekends working with his wife in the garden, so water is a big part of his life, both in and out of the office as ValleyCrest’s director of water management solutions.

Restuccia got his start doing irrigation on a cotton farm and saw first-hand just how much water it took. That’s when he really started to consider changing the way we use water. “That’s when I really started to think about water management and how it affects our lives,” he says.

A few years later, he started working at Rain Bird and saw the opportunity to change the way people think about irrigation and how they can use their water in a smarter way. “It wasn’t a matter of applying water.
It was more important, I thought, to manage it effectively, not only to save water but for plant health as well,” he says.

PUTTING WHY BEFORE HOW. Restuccia is a communicator at heart and his passion for proper water usage is starting to spread. Water issues are coming to the forefront of the industry. People are ready to listen and he is getting the word out there with digital tools.

“His passion of networking through social media and blog postings is something that is new to our industry,” says Eric Santos, ValleyCrest division leader for irrigation and water management. “He really deserves a lot of the credit for the marketing ValleyCrest does specifically to water management. Many people talk about using social media, but he actually gets it done.”

Restuccia saw a need to talk about the why of water management to get people interested in the how and so he started blogging at ValleyCrest Takes On. “Most people’s water bills aren’t very expensive and they think that water is just a public service,” he says. “It’s just there and I don’t think that people really have an awareness. So when we come in and talked about water management – well if there was no awareness, we couldn’t be very effective.”

The blog has really taken off. It took three years to build 100,000 unique visitors but in the last month alone, they’ve gotten 10,000, and his Twitter handle, @H2Otrends, has nearly 1,400 followers. “I think (the blog) is the core of what has led to his success because it just continually puts out new messages every week,” says Alan Harris, a fellow ValleyCrest Takes On blogger. “It’s one of those things that spreads just from people being exposed to it and hearing about it and you don’t lose the people that you talk to early on. It just adds up.”

Restuccia is now lining up speaking engagements months in advance, but he still wakes up every day with the same goal: to get the word out and save water. It’s one of his biggest strengths and he loves to do it. “He loves being up in front of a crowd. It’s really in his blood,” Santos says.

His hope is that in 10 years, he can look

There are two women that have been instrumental in Restuccia’s successes over the years. They’ve helped him with his blog, taught him about plants and inspired him to excel. And they aren’t even on the payroll.

Restuccia’s wife, Devonna Hall, is a master gardener who has taken him to countless gardens and has spent hours teaching him all about plants, soil and water. “She has taught me most of what I know about horticulture and really challenged me to better my knowledge about plants and design so I don’t just think the solution to water efficiency is technology in irrigation,” he says. “She has been supportive of my work, and more importantly, a source of new ideas and inspiration for many of the articles I have written. I am so lucky to have her in my life because I learn something new from her every day.”

His daughter, Lauren Proctor, has helped Restuccia with digital marketing and spreading the word. In fact, information she supplied to Restuccia ultimately became his proposal for the Valley Crest Takes On blog. “She is a wealth of consulting information for any of the digital marketing I do. Lauren provides hours of free and very valuable advice on how to spread the word about how to maximize efficient water management,” he says.
back and be proud of the work the industry has done as a whole: landscape contractors, water agencies, manufacturers and irrigators. He and the ValleyCrest team have had some great successes over the years and he believes that it’s the blending of science, technology and design that will get results.

“I really hope that I can look back and say we’ve been able to really create some synergies that allowed us to have made a big impact on the amount of water people are using in the landscape as a result of that,” he says.

BUILDING A TEAM. Restuccia has had his share of mentors when he started out, and he’s never done learning. Even after 17 years of talking water, he’ll call up Travis Bridges or Dave Palumbo, who trained him at Rain Bird, for product information and troubleshooting. He’s got a good team at ValleyCrest as well. He and Harris edit one another’s blog posts and every week, he learns something new from Eric Santos.

“I feel very lucky that I have a huge resource of people to call that will help me,” Restuccia says.

Restuccia is paying it forward and helping others spread the word about good water management. A few years ago, ValleyCrest created the position of regional irrigation advisor to meet the rising demand, and to educate clients. Santos and Restuccia were getting spread too thin and so ValleyCrest created regional position to coach clients about smart water use. As Harris says, “They’re little Richards.”

Rather than just focusing on the right technical experience, ValleyCrest puts an emphasis on communication skills that they can bring up to speed on the more technical aspects. They look for “someone who tends to have the traits of someone like an Alan or a Richard,” Santos says.

That teamwork is one of Restuccia’s favorite parts of the job, and he says the people a big part of the reason he stays in the industry. “We’re always looking and willing to share our ideas to be more efficient about the water we use. And I really enjoy that. It really does feel like everyone is pitching in.”

Above: Restuccia, center, and the ValleyCrest team accept the 2012 Smart Irrigation Month Smart Marketing Contest award from the Irrigation Association.
Below: Restuccia likes to spend his free time out in the backyard garden.
Michael Kravitsky IV started in sales early. When he was five years old, he used to accompany his father on calls for his lawn care business. His father would head out to a driving range on the corner of Cedar Crest and Tilghman in Allentown, Pa. with a pocket full of change and start calling. “I’d be hitting golf balls and all of a sudden he’d say ‘okay let’s go’ and we’d drive over to their house to give the estimate,” Kravitsky says.

Fast forward a few years and Kravitsky and his brother Shawn co-own Grasshopper Lawns, the landscaping company their father started fifty years ago.
“It’s bittersweet,” Kravitsky says, “the reason for that is my dad bled lawn care. He bled this business … he lived for this business. My biggest regret is he passed away last year and never got to see fifty years.”

Grasshopper Lawns was started by Kravitsky’s father in 1964 when he bought two franchises called Lawn-A-Mat. At the time, he was running an aluminum awning business and an apartment business.

“It was pretty cool because as kids, in the springtime it would be all about lawn care,” Kravitsky says. “We all worked in the business. Summer to fall was the awning business, then in the wintertime we’d refurbish an apartment or two.”

As Kravitsky got older, he started joining the crews on the road.

“I loved driving the machines, so the guys would drive me to the jobs,” he says. When he was old enough to drive, he started skipping school to do work on the jobsites. Because the school didn’t approve, he started working after school instead.

In 1980 Kravitsky joined Grasshopper Lawns full time. At the time, Kravitsky had his hand in a lot of running the business: doing lawn care and maintenance on the equipment. Even Kravitsky’s grandfather joined in: After he retired as chief of police of Edwardsville, he worked in sales, and encouraged Kravitsky to do the same.

“My Pop Pop said ‘Why don’t you learn to do some sales?’” he says. He would spend half his day working on a job, the other half of the day selling and would then come home to repair equipment. Then, he’s start calling the people he’d given estimates to.

When his dad suggested he start learning how to run the business side of things, Kravitsky decided to let the service part go, as well as sales and service as time went on.

“I probably haven’t turned a wrench or been on a sale in at least 10 to 15 years,” he says.

Roughly 15 years ago, Kravitsky’s father stepped away from the lawn business, and around five years ago the brothers officially bought it from him.

GIVING BACK. Outside of the business itself, Kravitsky and Grasshopper Lawns are largely involved with organizations and community service. They’ve been involved with PLANET since it was PLCAA, joining the second year it was formed.

Kravitsky was actually on the board of directors, at his first board meeting when the group made the decision to dismantle PLCAA. Kravitsky relates that decision to when Coke changed their formula.

“Everything works great and you love that soda, then they went ahead and made the decision to change something and change is huge … I was never so devastated than I was at that meeting. I said ‘Are you guys crazy? This has been a great organization.’ We grew up on it, we were there every year seeing the people. It was something that was very familiar to me, our company and my family, and then it’s all going to be taken away, and then the unknown of ‘what’s going to happen with the new association?’ But PLANET has grown from it.”

One for being at something when it starts, Kravitsky and his team was also at the first Renewal and Remembrance in Washington D.C., in 1997. The two-day event gives volunteers the opportunity to help beautify the grounds at Arlington Cemetery, then lobby on Capitol Hill in support of different bills relevant to the industry. Kravitsky says he remembers the first year was chilly, but they were eager to give back to the country.

“It just filled you with a patriotism and you wanted to do it,” he says. “It didn’t matter that it was cold, we wanted to be there for that, and we’re just so proud that we’re one of the first ones to be able to do that.”

Grasshopper Lawns also participates in Day of Service, something they did many years “unofficially” before PLANET started organizing it. The company goes to parks in the community and takes care of them. Another thing they do is work in partnership with local sports parks. If the park puts up a sign advertising Grasshopper Lawns’ services, the company will give them a 50 percent discount off all their services.

“We love giving back to the community,” Kravitsky says. “We treat all our town’s fields for free: town hall, et cetera. We don’t charge for any of their services.”

A DAY IN THE LIFE. Kravitsky always tries to see his crew members twice a day. In the morning, he wants to check in with them and see what’s going on. In the evening, he wants to see how their day went and if there’s anything they need. He tries his best to keep his crews well equipped and comfortable so

Above: Kravitsky’s father first started off in the aluminum awning and apartment businesses before running two Lawn-A-Mat franchises.
Far left: Kravitsky has been flying planes since 2001.
they do their job as well as they can.

“They need to do a good job because they pay me,” he says, explaining that if his crews didn’t do a good job, the company wouldn’t make money. “I don’t pay them. They pay me and I just handle the transactions for their paychecks every few weeks. That’s how I feel, that’s how I run this company.”

Joe Kucik, president of Real Green Systems, has been a friend of Kravitsky’s for roughly 18 to 20 years.

“He’s a great friend to have do anything for you,” Kucik says. “He’s a mentor in the industry and he’s willing to help anybody out.”

Kucik met Kravitsky at a trade show, running into him a few times before Kravitsky bought the software. Because the training would take place close to Christmas, Kravitsky invited Kucik to the company Christmas party. Unknown to Kucik, a restaurant in Wilkesburg would host a joint holiday party, and business owners could reserve tables for their company to spend the evening networking and celebrating with other firms.

“I didn’t know anything about (Grasshopper Lawns) and I walk in this door and I was blown away,” Kucik says. “I thought it was just his company, so you can imagine it was overwhelming. I’m thinking he has hundreds of employees, and I find Michael and say ‘this is an amazing company party’ and Michael replies ‘our table is over there.’”

Kucik remembers looking over and seeing a handful of employees, much less than the hundreds he’d originally thought. “We’ve been good friends ever since,” Kucik says.

AN HONEST MAN. When it comes to ethics, Kravitsky considers honesty something he wants to instill in all aspects of the company.

“I’m involved with payroll,” he says. “If they’re owed a penny, they’ll get it, and they know it.”

Kravitsky says last year one of the company’s technicians was getting incorrectly deducted a certain amount from his paycheck and no one noticed.

“I thought to myself, ‘how the heck did I miss that for so many months?’” Kravitsky says. “So I went to the employee and said ‘look, I found a mistake to your benefit on your payroll. In your next check I’m gonna give it back to you because that’s not right, you shouldn’t have that taken out.’”

Kravitsky says the employee was surprised and pointed out that Kravitsky could have stayed quiet and gotten away with it, but it’s a thought Kravitsky never even considered.

His honesty also comes through on sales, as he prides his company in selling customers only what they need, even if the customer is willing to pay for unnecessary services.

“You don’t know how much work we’ve turned away where a customer wants something and we say ‘no save your money, do this,’” he says. “That’s a company culture. I do not want to take people’s money.”

Kravitsky credits this mantra to his upbringing. His grandfather was chief of police and his sister was a cop who married her sergeant. His other brother and three cousins are PA State Troopers and two of his other cousins are magistrates.

“I guess with that background and the way we grew up, you do the right thing,” he says. “And I hope we always do the right thing.”

When he’s not in the office, Kravitsky can be found doing what some would call extreme sports.

“If it’s winter time, I’m on a snowmobile,” he says. “The rest of the time, you will find me in my airplane. In a plane, snowmobiling, and the third passion is motorcycles.”

The snowmobiling started way back, with Kravitsky spending the last 35 years snowmobiling in Quebec. He calls it “some of the happiest times” of his life. Now, he and his son go every year. His passion for flying started in 2001.

“It was December,” he says, “and I remember driving by the airport and I said ‘before I turn 40, I need to learn how to fly.’” So I turned into the airport, and the guy took me up within five minutes of being there.”

The motorcycle passion came in 2008 when Kravitsky was with friends in Key West. When they met up at a bar one night, they pulled up on mopeds (a typical mode of transportation for the area) and another friend pulled up on a motorcycle.

“I told this guy, ‘Never get there the same time we do,’” he says. “You’re pulling in on a Harley, we’re pulling in on mopeds, and it doesn’t look too good for us.”

Now, Kravitsky owns three bikes and his family takes bike trips together.

“You’ll find us anywhere on them, as long as the weather’s good,” he says.