

2017

LEADERSHIP AWARDS

2017 LEADERSHIP AWARD WINNERS



RICK DOESBURG

THORNTON
LANDSCAPE



WARREN GOROWITZ

EWING IRRIGATION &
LANDSCAPE SUPPLY



MATT JESSON

GREEN LAWN FERTILIZING
AND GREEN PEST SOLUTIONS



**JESUS 'CHUY'
MEDRANO**

COCAL LANDSCAPE



2017 EMERGING LEADER

KELLY DOWELL

DOWCO

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Stephanie Schwenke



Turf Market Manager
Syngenta Lawn and Garden



**STEPHANIE
SCHWENKE**

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“We appreciate your vision and expertise and look forward to growing beside leaders like you in the years to come.”



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PAY IT FORWARD

Rick Doesburg was part of and ran a successful landscaping business for decades, but it's his contribution to younger generations that meant the most to him. **By Kristen Hampshire**

RICK DOESBURG RECALLS the first time he handed a \$1,000 scholarship to a student preparing for a career in the green industry. Only one year prior, he had purchased Thornton Landscape in Maineville, Ohio, from its founders, who were also his fraternity brothers at The Ohio State University. Doesburg had worked for the business since he finished college, joining in 1969.

Doesburg was an original charter member of the Educational Foundation for the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), now National Association of Landscape Professionals. "It was wonderful when I became an ambassador, and we had fun raising millions of dollars for the foundation," he says. "I had tears in my eyes when I handed the first scholarship to a student, and every year I could give \$1,000 to a deserving student based on the criteria I had put forth for the Thornton Landscape Doesburg Family Scholarship."

Doesburg has granted more than \$17,000 in scholarship money to students since the foundation started. Debra Holder was executive director of ALCA for 25 years and played a mentorship role as an original Trailblazer, along with being a founding member of the Educational Foundation. "He is passionate about young people coming into the industry," Holder says. "And as a mentor, he just loved to help people grow in success."

Meaningful associations. Association involvement opened Doesburg's eyes to many industry possibilities so that he could someday do the same for younger members. Over the years, Thornton Landscape went on to win many national, state and local design/build awards for its work.

"The key word is 'networking,' and it's true that what makes

conferences, meetings and board meetings so valuable is the networking, and with that comes the friendships," Doesburg says.

Jim McCutcheon is one of those friends. The CEO of HighGrove Partners met Doesburg in the late 1990s at an ALCA conference before either of them owned their businesses.

Doesburg gave McCutcheon some advice – get involved. "For me personally and for my business, that has made a tremendous impact and I feel like I owe him thanks," McCutcheon says. "He is truly one of my mentors in the industry."

McCutcheon recalls a meeting in Columbus, Ohio, when Doesburg stood up at an awards ceremony and made a pitch for the Educational Foundation.

"I had no business endowing a scholarship at that point in time, but I was convinced with the way he put it," McCutcheon says. "He has done more to help students and programs in this industry than anyone I can think of."

That meeting ultimately set the stage for the Trailblazers program, where industry leaders serve as mentors. Doesburg was one of the first.

"We visited each other's operations and donated our time, but the beauty of it was, I always learned more than I think I ever taught anyone by being with them and having them explain their problems and issues to me," Doesburg says.

Alternatively, others learned from Doesburg by simply watching.

"What I learned from him was how he really built some great relationships with clients and they became friends and counterparts," says Jud Griggs of Scapes Group in Roswell, Georgia. "It was more than a business relationship, and I tried to follow some of those same techniques."



"Semi-retired" Doesburg is able to spend his Saturday's on the golf course now instead of in the office.



Doesburg credits his son for pushing him to explore ownership of Thornton Landscape.

Doing what's right. Doesburg became president of ALCA in 2002, and he calls it "the most honored thing I have done in my career."

Doesburg had served as president of the Ohio Nurserymen's Association in 1984, at the same time he was president of the Cincinnati Homebuilders Association (for two terms).

"He was never afraid to be the contrarian and to say, 'I hear you, but you might want to consider this,'" McCutcheon says. When

Doesburg gets involved, he's all in.

"He typically has strong opinions – and I think some association people want to be politically correct and not make waves," Griggs says. "Rick never worried about that."

His honesty was always refreshing, Holder says.

"You always knew where he stood," she says. "There was never any hesitation with wondering, 'What is he really thinking?' and we always appreciated that."

Continuing a legacy. The actual transaction to make Doesburg the owner went smoothly, and so did the transition. "It was an easy fit because I had been there for 30 years," Doesburg says. "Nothing changed when I bought the company except on Fridays, I had to make payroll."

Once Doesburg bought the business, his son, Andy, joined. In fact, it was his son's interest in running a business with his dad that really pushed Doesburg to take ownership, he says.

Andy came on board and worked his way up the ranks in the company. "He has evolved into a good manager and president and he knows how to run the business," Doesburg says. "It's fun working with him – he's kind of my best friend, so that makes it special."

Doesburg is currently "semi-retired," though in his terms, that means spending Saturdays on the golf course rather than in the office – with an eye to spend one more day on the course, too. "I try to stay out of the way as much as possible and let Andy make the decisions," Doesburg says.

Meanwhile, Thornton Landscape continues a legacy of serving industry associations. Founders Gary and Bill Thornton served as ALCA president, as did Doesburg, who also gave time to the Ohio Nurserymen's Association and Cincinnati's Home Builders Association like Andy is now doing.

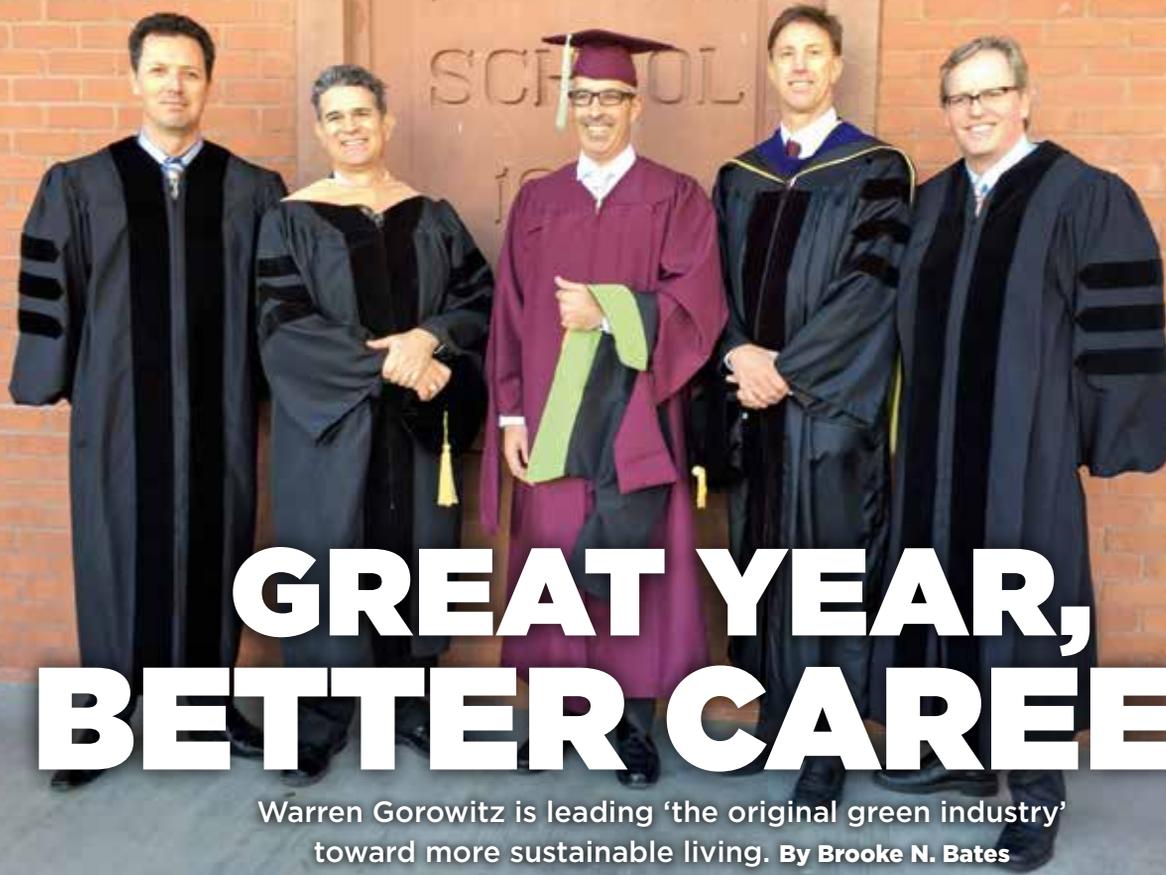
"I love that tradition," Holder says. "And Andy may make a fourth president at some point."

The business, indeed, has been a family affair. It's where Doesburg met his wife of 43 years, Peggy. She was a secretary at Thornton Landscape. A year later, they got married.

"We have date night every Friday night, and have for years. We travel a little bit and would like to travel more," Doesburg says.

Andy and their daughter, Stephanie, live close by. "We get together as often as we can," he says of them and three grandchildren. "I may never retire completely, but I'm slowing down a little." ●

NORMAL
SCHOOL



GREAT YEAR, BETTER CAREER

Warren Gorowitz is leading 'the original green industry'
toward more sustainable living. By Brooke N. Bates

A **S VICE PRESIDENT OF SUSTAINABILITY,** Warren Gorowitz doesn't just lead water conservation efforts at Ewing Irrigation & Landscape Supply. Throughout his 23-year career, he has proven to be a proactive leader on the cutting-edge of promoting sustainability to the entire green industry and beyond.

And his interest in the industry really got started where a lot of people enjoy retirement.

Across the street from his childhood home was Rancho Park Golf Course in Los Angeles, where Gorowitz started working at age 14 – and even worked several PGA and LPGA tournaments. This experience, combined with green influences he grew up around, like neighbors who had gardens, sparked his interest in the horticulture industry.

"Some of my first memories during childhood were being outdoors," Gorowitz says. "I knew I wanted to do something that was connected to the outdoors."

Rising in the ranks. Thinking he might want to become a golf course superintendent, Gorowitz decided to study ornamental horticulture at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly San Luis Obispo). He also worked in the college bookstore selling computers, which honed his other interest in technology. By combining these two passions, Gorowitz narrowed his focus to the technical side of the green industry – irrigation.

At a student career fair in January 1994, a friend introduced Gorowitz to a wholesale irrigation distribution company called

Ewing, where Cliff Woodbury was recruiting Cal Poly grads.

"I was extremely impressed with Warren," says Woodbury, now Ewing's executive vice president of culture and engagement, who had just started working at Ewing about a year before he met Gorowitz. "He was a well-prepared, professional kid whose passion and sincerity stood out."

Gorowitz was hired by Ewing right after graduating in 1994, initially to do outside sales for irrigation control systems like the ones he used at Rancho Park.

He started on a Friday, helping move Ewing's Anaheim store to a new location. Then the following week, the branch manager there turned in his two weeks' notice and Gorowitz ended up in that position. With no prior experience managing people, he lived out Cal Poly's motto, to "learn by doing." He went on to manage and open several different branches for Ewing, often with a simultaneous role of salesman, selling the company's specialty products.

"It's not normal for somebody to come into our company and start taking on increased responsibility, but he was of that ilk," Woodbury says. "I've watched him grow quickly because he genuinely loves the business that we're in – every aspect of it, from the horticulture to the distribution to the customers."

Gorowitz says that when he started working at Ewing, people thought of him as Mikey from the Life cereal commercials, because he'd try anything. "I don't tend to say no to things because I'm always wanting to learn and take advantage of opportunities to grow," he says. "I have this continuous hunger for knowledge, and how to take that and apply it to help people."

Forging a role in sustainability. The product that cemented his (and Ewing's) focus on water conservation was the MP Rotator. Seeing how this technology could reduce water use, Gorowitz started spending his spare time learning everything he could about water management and efficiency.

"That's when we realized we have a role to provide solutions that help people conserve water," Gorowitz says. "From there, we created a water management sales team that I managed. As soon as people started talking about 'sustainability,' I knew it was going to be an important part of our industry."

Three years ago, Gorowitz moved into his current role as VP of sustainability. Gorowitz oversees all of Ewing's sustainability products and initiatives, both internally and externally throughout the landscape industry.

"He was always an early adopter and a champion of new and different ways to use water more efficiently and effectively," Woodbury says.

Woodbury says the drive and passion that Gorowitz demonstrates has helped Ewing and its customers stay relevant through changing environmental concerns over time.

"Warren keeps Ewing a step ahead when it comes to conservation and sustainability," says John Farner, government and public affairs director at the Irrigation Association. "Because Warren has that foresight into industry trends and what the customers want, they're able to be proactive in the marketplace."

Being green. As the demand for more eco-friendly practices and products has increased, so have the opportunities for Gorowitz to promote sustainability – not just inside of Ewing, but throughout the industry.

"There's environmental value, financial value, and the whole health and wellbeing value that come from outdoor green spaces," Gorowitz says.

"So, as an industry, we're realizing that all these systems work together and understanding the positive and negative effects that we can have, depending on how we use our resources."

With the goal of improving the perception and the

impact of the "original green industry," as he calls it, Gorowitz speaks regularly at industry events to promote responsible resource management and sustainability.

"My biggest passion is trying to figure out how we all can work together to develop a cohesive, collaborative message about the benefits of what we do every day as stewards of the environment," says Gorowitz, who's active in numerous trade associations.

Farner calls this "The Year of Warren," as Gorowitz was inducted into the Green Industry Hall of Fame in May, and he will become president of the Irrigation Association in November. An IA Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor and Texas Licensed Irrigator, Gorowitz is also co-chair of the USGBC Water Efficiency Technical Advisory Group. He has been involved with the National Association of Landscape Professionals – particularly its National Collegiate Landscape Competition – for many years.

"He's always held an interest in how regulations affect the industry and promoting the benefits of (sustainable) irrigation and green infrastructure," Farner says. "He's always willing

to help out, from menial tasks to high-profile speaking on behalf of the association. He's well-spoken and he cares about the work he does."

Lynda Wightman, who has known Gorowitz since his days at Cal Poly, agrees. "Warren walks the talk," says Wightman, industry relations manager at one of Ewing's partner irrigation equipment manufacturers, Hunter Industries. "He truly believes in making our world a better place to live, and works relentlessly to develop an awareness of how our industry can do that."

Though he has a long list of honors and accomplishments, Gorowitz says his proudest accomplishment came last year, when he earned an executive master of sustainability of leadership from Arizona State University.

"It reignited my passion for our industry, and helped me understand my purpose of really wanting to make a difference," he says. "It gave me an opportunity to learn from others in the sustainability field outside of our sector and most importantly, it gave me a strong appreciation for what an amazing industry I get the honor to work in every day." ●

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Gorowitz is most proud of his executive master of sustainability of leadership from Arizona State.





NOT A KNOW-IT-ALL

Matt Jesson succeeded in business by leveraging best practices from other industry leaders, and then sharing what he learned with others.

By Brooke N. Bates

DOZENS OF LCOS across the country have received calls and letters from Matt Jesson, president and owner of Green Lawn Fertilizing and Green Pest Solutions, asking if he can come visit them. Those initial visits often develop into meaningful mentorships and close friendships – with plenty more calls, visits and golf games along the way – as Jesson soaks up advice from the most successful lawn care leaders.

On a map in his office, pins mark the 40-plus companies Jesson and his team have visited over the past 14 years, spanning 20 states and into Canada. “Every business is doing something better than you are,” Jesson says. “You can always improve and learn from others.”

By integrating these best practices into his own company, Jesson and his team have grown Green Lawn Fertilizing to over \$13 million through 14 years of consistent growth – while giving back to the industry even more than they’re gleaming from it.

Building a strong foundation. Jesson’s landscaping career began in fifth grade, when he and his older brother, Keith, started Jesson Landscaping.

By his senior year of high school, the business had 75 customers. When his brother went off to college, Jesson bought him out and continued growing the company. While Jesson earned his marketing degree at West Chester University and played defensive tackle for the football team, he hired a full-time employee to manage the busi-

ness and several college friends helped out. In 2002, after a couple of years working in the business development department of half.com, he decided to follow his dream and focus solely on the landscaping company.

In 2004, Jesson Landscaping officially became Green Lawn Fertilizing. He dropped his name because he wanted a brand that easily explained his services. But, at the time, no one on his leadership team knew much about the business of lawn care, so he used a treat made in Philadelphia to get on the good side of industry veterans.

“I wrote letters to several business owners who were on Lawn & Landscape’s Top 100 list and included some Tastykakes,” he says. “I asked if I could bring my team to visit, and several businesses welcomed the opportunity.”

That first year, Jesson reached out to Jim Campanella, who was president of Lawn Dawg. After visiting each other’s companies, Campanella agreed to consult Jesson on weekly phone calls, where he reviewed his numbers and answered his questions. Early on, Jesson sent Campanella a blank score card from Pebble Beach golf resort with both of their names on it; by the date, Jesson wrote, “When we hit 5,000 customers.”

“He listened more than he spoke, and asked a lot of great questions,” Campanella says.

In the spring of 2007, Jesson booked a tee time at California-based Pebble Beach and accommodations at a nearby resort. He flew Campanella there to help him celebrate 5,000 customers and over \$2 million in revenue, with the game of golf he’d promised.

Planning for growth. Joe Kucik, owner of Real Green Systems, remembers the first call he got from Jesson 15 years ago. It was about a study Jesson was doing to evaluate Real Green's software and would share with Kucik.

"I'm thinking, here's this little company doing a big software evaluation? I was expecting it to be a couple of pages, maybe a checklist," Kucik says. "It turned out to be a 150-page document. When I saw it, I was blown away, like holy cow, this guy is doing things the right way."

Jesson's penchant for planning is one of the first things people notice about him.

When he brings his team to visit other companies, they bring "about 400 spreadsheets," says Chris Senske, president of Senske Lawn & Tree Care, based in Kennewick, Washington. "Any number that could be produced from operating a business, Matt has a spreadsheet for it."

Jesson's team tracks more than 50 daily reports and 100 weekly reports, constantly analyzing data to fine-tune operations. When he launched Green Pest Solutions as a separately branded division in 2012, for example, it was after two years of writing business plans and meeting with leaders like Ian Robinson at Massey Services about combining pest and lawn care services.

"Matt's an impressive guy – engaging, approachable and personable," Robinson says. "How could you not instantly like him and sense 'here's a guy on a mission.' He knows a



ABOVE: About 15 years ago, Jesson teamed with Real Green for a study and to evaluate the company's software. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** In his spare time, Jesson, left, enjoys regularly hitting the greens with a goal of one day playing Augusta National. Here, he's pictured with Jim Campanella at Pebble Beach.

tremendous amount, but never presumes to know it all."

Giving back. About six years ago, Jesson invited nine other LCOs to meet twice a year as a peer group and openly share financials, sales and marketing strategies and results. When Senske received the invitation, his lawn care business was stagnant – as were many around the country. He asked his VP of operations to "humor" him and attend the first meeting.

"He came back so energized and excited about how, with the right marketing mix, we could grow lawn care again," Senske says. "It has more than doubled, almost tripled, with double-digit growth since Matt, with his youthful exuberance, enthusiasm and energy, inspired us to reach for the stars and grow the lawn care business."

Beyond the peer group, Jesson willingly shares advice and data with anyone who asks,

welcoming at least half a dozen companies to visit his operations each year.

"I've always tried to have an open door to any companies that want to improve," Jesson says. "That was one thing Jim Campanella told me. He said, 'Matt, I'm going to help you; just make sure you give back when you're able to and help other young leaders grow.'"

Drive to be the best.

In March 2018, Jesson will graduate from a three-year executive education program at Harvard Business School.

Two years ago, Jesson announced a 20-year plan targeting consistent 13 percent annual growth with a goal of hitting \$100 million. "My goal has always been to have great leaders and operate the business today like a \$50 or \$100 million business, because we're going to get there," Jesson says.

Between growing his business exponentially, building a

national network of like-minded leaders, enjoying season tickets to the Philadelphia Eagles and regularly hitting the greens (with a goal of one day playing Augusta National), Jesson still makes family time a priority. Kristy, his wife of six years, is his "rock and strongest supporter," and they enjoy summer vacations to Ocean City, New Jersey, with their 2-year-old daughter Juliet and newborn baby, Joslyn, who arrived in late August 2017.

In fact, Campanella says Jesson turned down a golf trip invitation in September so he could stay home with his wife and daughters.

"Any business owner in this industry should aspire to be like Matt," Campanella says. "He demonstrates pride and professionalism in everything he does and says. He never stops trying to learn, because he has a drive to be the very best at everything he does – in both his personal and professional life." ●



LIVING THE DREAM

Jesus "Chuy" Medrano proves that growing your own destiny is possible. **By Kristen Hampshire**

THE OUTDOORS and working the land are simply part of Jesus "Chuy" Medrano's DNA. The owner of CoCal Landscape in Denver was raised on a farm in Chihuahua, Mexico, where his family grew corn, had apple orchards and tended to cattle and horses. "We used to do everything that farmers do to make ends meet," he says.

When Medrano came to the United States in the early 1970s to find work, he ended up taking a job in a factory that made electric motors, but couldn't stand being cooped up for 10 hours a day.

Medrano, with his characteristic wide-brimmed ranch hat, cowboy boots and 44 years of experience has helped grow CoCal to one of the largest Hispanic-owned landscape companies in the nation at \$18 million in revenue. He is also the founding president of the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance. Medrano is closely involved with the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado and National Association of Landscape Professionals.

It hasn't always been easy. Medrano brought his company back from the brink of bankruptcy during the Great Recession – it was doing \$45 million in sales and the construction market fell out. His former partner Tom Fochtman describes Medrano as "a leader of people."

"He's the kind of guy who can light up the room because he's warm and has a great sense of humor – he's highly respected," Fochtman says.

Growing his own. Fochtman remembers meeting Medrano for the first time. He had flown from

Chicago to interview at ValleyCrest in Denver, where Medrano was already working. Fochtman had a landscape architect degree and Medrano was an expert in the field. Fochtman was on a jobsite during an interview with some higher-ups and saw Medrano lying in a parking lot with his arm 3 feet deep fiddling with an irrigation break. “The manager, as we pulled up, said, “This is a really good guy. He has a lot of potential,” Fochtman says.

Medrano recalls when Fochtman was relocating to Denver to take the job. He ended up having to pick him up after Fochtman has some car trouble. “We kind of hit it off. I liked him and he liked me, and we began working together as co-workers, and it went from there,” Medrano says.

Eventually, both were seeking greater opportunity. That’s when the conversations started about going into business together. “I wasn’t going to do it if he wasn’t my partner,” Fochtman says. They nicknamed each other “maestro,” which means teacher in Spanish.

“He taught me everything to do with the field,” Fochtman says. “And I taught him how to walk jobs and sell services, and I helped him with his English.”

They brought English classes to the workplace along with financial classes. The training went beyond the job; it was about creating a better life. Today, Medrano says training is an enormous focus at CoCal. The company dedicates every Friday in the off-season to four-hour training sessions. It’s a partnership and the team is equally invested, Medrano points out. “Everyone who has a job here has an opportunity to make it a career,” he says.

Many members of Medrano’s own family have chosen that path. CoCal is working on its fourth generation in the business; and Medrano’s son, Jody, now serves as president. His daughter, Marisol, works at the company, as does son Carlos. Medrano’s brother, Manuel, has worked at CoCal since day one. There were 560 people working at CoCal during the height of the company, before the Great Recession. “Every one of them was out there making money for us, and we felt like we really needed to take care of them,” Fochtman says.

That meant providing company loans to workers from time to time, and even going to court with a team member if there was an unjust claim, Fochtman says. “A lot of this was Chuy – and I learned it from him.”

Medrano says he has guys who have been working with him since the 1980s. “I remember back, seeing them buy their first home, become Americans, have their first child, graduate from college,” he says. “These are proud moments for me.”

Reinvention post-Recession. “Anything that is growing can get sick, and then you have to restart or grab energy from somewhere and get going on it,” Medrano says.

In 2011, the construction industry fell flat and the company lost half of its revenue. “We closed the door on the construction division and we let the maintenance division carry us through,” Medrano says. At the same time, Fochtman was ready to part ways. “We needed to get divorced,” Fochtman says. “I wanted to do things differently in the company than he did.”

It was a tough time for Medrano. “Not only did my revenue go to hell, I had to come up with money for a down payment to buy out my partner and then deal with the Recession,” he says.

But Medrano’s loyal people and longtime customers stuck by him. He moved to a four-day workweek, but employees wanted to show up Friday anyway. “The loyal ones didn’t care, they still worked even though they were not going to be paid,” he says.

Medrano paid back every hour they had worked without compensation during the Great Recession and then some once the company stabilized. And CoCal did recover with a renewed focus on maintenance. Now, CoCal is about 300 employees strong with revenues of \$18 million. In 2011, Medrano helped found the National Hispanic Landscape Alliance. He noticed at all the industry conferences he attended, none of the seminars were offered in Spanish, so he organized with some others to change that.

“Now we have about 500 members from all over the country,” he says.

Medrano’s advice to anyone in the industry, and particularly those starting out: Get involved in associations. And, surround yourself with advisers. “Don’t risk what you worked so hard to build,” he says.

In spite of all the building, Medrano takes time out to enjoy hobbies and his family. He has been married to his wife since 1975.

Medrano is “living the dream,” Fochtman says, proud of his former partner’s success. “He is one of the great leaders in the industry.” ●



CoCal focuses on educating its employees to provide them not only industry knowledge, but support for a better life overall.



CHRIS SENSKE



MARIA CANDLER



RICHARD RESTUCCIA

ALWAYS LEARNING

We asked a few past Leadership Award winners about their thoughts on being a leader.

MARIA CANDLER, James River Grounds Management: Class of 2004

Being the leader was never a career goal for me. In the early days, when James River was small, I just looked around and saw so much that needed to be organized, streamlined, improved. I rolled up my sleeves and went to the task. In those days, I thought leadership was something that you do – giving directions, organizing teams, making big decisions. Now nearly 24 years later, I realize that good leadership is so much more. It's about being open-minded, listening to your team, knowing what makes your team tick and more importantly, helping them understand themselves in a more meaningful way.

One of the harder lessons I've had to learn is to let go and get out of the way. I'm a recovering perfectionist and as such, many years were spent working super hard on just about everything and, admittedly in the process, step-

ping on a lot of toes. Now I find joy in allowing others to take things on and grow and learn. When I see one of our team members take on a big challenge or something new and do well, it's one of the absolute best feelings. It's a sense of accomplishment that is far greater and more impactful than if I had just done it myself. It's the best lesson learned.

CHRIS SENSKE, Senske Services: Class of 1999

One comes into a leadership position with a debt. You owe your team the tools and time necessary to grow the business and grow themselves personally. I am here to serve the people I am leading. I am paying off the debt I owe every day by serving them. I serve them by giving each individual a clear message of the company values, a clear vision of what we are trying to accomplish in terms of goals, objectives and progress, and I encourage each team member

to improve themselves personally as individuals, as team contributors and as an integral member of their family.

I always used to say my leadership/management philosophy was "to give people enough rope to hang

themselves." I've recently adopted a more positive and realistic approach based on Steve Jobs' oft-repeated saying on his management style: "We hire people to tell us what to do. That's what we pay them for." My job at Senske is to give the company direction and let others who are much more capable run the company.

RICHARD RESTUCCIA, Jain Irrigation: Class of 2014

To be a great leader means putting the success of the industry and your organization ahead of your own ambitions and expectations. It takes a willingness to serve without asking if people appreciate the work you do. It takes understanding that change is gradual, incremental and constant. It takes humility to understand you are not the center of attention, but serve a larger order. Keeping these concepts in the front of their mind each day, leaders move forward making a difference in the industry and for their organizations. ●

MAKING AN EARLY **IMPACT**

Kelly Dowell dove headfirst into the industry she grew up in, becoming a leader at a young age.

By Lauren Rathmell



KELLY DOWELL IS A PIONEER. At 29 years old, she's created Dowco's first sales and account management systems, and has helped develop the National Association of Landscape Professionals' Young Professionals group. And she is Lawn & Landscape's first Emerging Leader Award recipient.

"I see a niche and I fill it," Dowell says. "That's the kind of stuff that I get excited about."

She's been immersed in the lawn care industry since she was a little girl, watching her parents run their St. Louis-based landscape company, Dowco.

Jim Paluch, president of consulting group JP Horizons, has watched Dowell grow into a successful leader in the industry.

"I can remember her as a little girl, coming along with her parents to seminars and workshops," he says.

Her passion started early on as she worked alongside industry veterans during her childhood. “She was giving a presentation alongside my son (three years ago), and this was in front of about 70 industry veterans, and there’s these two young kids,” Paluch says. “And (Dowell) had them with her the entire time. She is so passionate about what she does.”

Dowell attended Lindenwood University in Saint Charles, Missouri, to study business administration. She was able to make the 30-minute commute to the family business on days she didn’t have class. After serving as an administrative assistant for Dowco, she was given a challenge she couldn’t pass up.

“One of our consultants challenged me to be the best account manager that Dowco has ever seen,” she says. “I didn’t take that lightly. And, I didn’t want people to think I got this job just because my dad is the boss. I really had to do something to make a dent in things.”

She says Dowco was very production-driven, getting a lot of work done, but lacking a sales process to upsell to current clients or find new ones. “So that was somewhere that I was able to jump in and make an impact,” Dowell says.

Once Dowell realized she had a place in the company, she continued working there.

“It’s hard to say where a child will go, but I knew she was going to be successful in whatever it was,” Paluch says.

For Paluch, seeing someone



“She’s just a great person to know. She always goes beyond and does more.”

Clay Martin, CEO,
Martin Recruiting
and Consulting

so driven at a young age gives him hope that the future of the industry is in good hands.

A valued leader. Dowell has three employees who report directly to her, along with her own accounts, online marketing, employee training and even her own freelance marketing on the side, which keeps her skills sharp.

“I freelance all over the country, so I’m always learning about other people’s challenges,” she says.

She also makes it a priority to travel at least nine times a year, even if that means shutting off her laptop and heading to a nearby lake for the weekend.

“I guess one of my goals is to grow a business enough that I

can travel for like four weeks in January,” she says.

She does have an extensive travel log with trips to Hawaii, Mexico and the Caribbean to name a few.

“I always thought I was a beach girl, but I really love the mountains,” she says. “There’s just something amazing about them. Colorado is my favorite state.”

Dowell has done a lot for herself in terms of career advancement, but it’s also what she’s done for others that makes her a valuable leader in the green industry.

Clay Martin, CEO of Martin Recruiting and Consulting, met Dowell at his first visit to GIE+EXPO last year. He was the new guy, and he says Dowell could sense that



ABOVE: While she enjoys taking multiple trips each year, Dowell says the mountains are her favorite place to visit. **LEFT:** Dowell works closely with NALP's Young Professionals group, which started out as a Facebook group.

he wasn't too familiar with things yet.

"At the expo, she kind of took me under her wing," he says. "She knew I needed some guidance and she didn't hesitate to step up and help me out."

Martin credits Dowell for helping him get his business on its feet, including help with his website.

Emails from Dowell urging him to make sure he is following a certain business technique, or even some helpful advice pop up from time to time.

"She's just a great person to know," Martin says. "She always goes beyond and does more."

While Dowell excels in the professional world, Martin says

she also has an admirable set of morals and values. "Aside from her business skills, her core values and morals are similar to mine," he says.

Outside the workplace.

Dowell has been a "big sister" through the Big Brother, Big Sister program for two years. Her "little sister" is 14, which Dowell says can be a challenge, but the experience has been very rewarding.

"I find out she's doing well in sports and in school," she says. "So that makes me happy."

Dowell also led the creation of the NALP's Young Professionals group, creating a way for young people to network.

She saw a hole in the industry for young people, and knew she wanted to help fill it. The

group started on Facebook in 2016 and now it's up to nearly 200 members.

"She is very involved, and she always, always follows through, which is something that is great for these young people to have," says Brett Lemcke, vice president of RM Landscape in Hilton, New York, and NALP board member.

Lemcke worked with Dowell to create the Young Professionals group and the two are continuing to work together to expand the program.

"I really want to get it moving for the first two years and then shift my involvement more with the NALP group itself," she says. "They really want to get me on that membership committee, but I haven't committed to that just yet."

While Dowell seems to have a lot going on, Lemcke notes that she is very smart with the time she has.

"She knows when to take something new on, and is aware of that. She knows how her time can be best served," he says.

Dowell spends a lot of that time with the employees of Dowco. She's the person the new employees (and pretty much anyone else that comes to Dowco) start with.

"I like to make that good first impression," she says. "And I like to relate the people that work for us with the clients that we do business with."

Like many in the industry, Dowell has experienced the challenges that come with finding good employees. She set up several events through Dowco Academy, a program that offers workshops and online training for Dowco employees, to educate the employees in areas outside of work.

"It's not showing them how to cut grass with a 52-inch mower," she says. "But it's something like, 'Here's how to save enough money so that you can afford the house you want, or buy a new car, or go on a trip with your family.'"

It's been a challenge to get everyone on board with the training. There were times when Dowell wasn't sure if the programs were even worth it.

Yet even the smallest payoff motivates her to keep planning.

"All you need is one smile, one person to buy that car," she says. "And that's all that matters. You've made an impact." ●

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