

GREENCARE FOR TROOPS

RECEIVES WHITE HOUSE RECOGNITION



» **DEN GARDNER** pictured with Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden. Gardner represented Project EverGreen and GreenCare for Troops at an event in Washington, DC honoring America's top 20 volunteer military programs.

As I walked through three separate areas of security a couple months ago at the White House (yep, Mr. Gardner Goes to Washington), my thoughts turned to September 11, 2001, and how the world has so drastically changed since that day of horror for millions of Americans.

I said to myself: "How on earth did being involved with Project EverGreen result in us getting a group to the White House? It's almost too difficult to comprehend!"

The burden on military families through two wars has been incredible. These true patriots have kept us safe for more than a decade since the death and devastation that day at the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania where an airplane of heroes went down to prevent another murderous attack by terrorists. But little did we know the role Project EverGreen would play the past half-dozen years in the lives of these thousands of military families.

Although the tragedy of September 11 will stay with us forever, a simple request by Project EverGreen board member Phil Fogarty 6 years ago ultimately resulted in a national program to spread the good word about the benefits of green spaces through GreenCare for Troops. Today, with a database of more than 12,000 military families and 3,500 volunteers nationwide, this Project EverGreen program is known nationally.

To this day, I'll remember that conversa-

tion with Phil (a lawn care operator in suburban Cleveland). "I've been helping some military families with free lawn care while the major breadwinner has been deployed," he explained. "Maybe we can do this nationally through Project EverGreen—help a couple hundred families and get a little publicity for our organization."

A few hundred families, huh? Well, this idea resulted in my journey to the White House back in April (with current Project EverGreen Executive Director Cindy Code and GreenCare for Troops Manager Joy Westenberg) to be recognized as one of the top 20 volunteer military programs in the nation by the White House. Through the Joining Forces Community Challenge (www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces), Project EverGreen was recognized for its efforts by First Lady Michelle Obama and Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden.

During 2 days of tours and receptions at the Pentagon and the White House, organizations across the country were saluted for their efforts. You know you've made a difference as an organization when the Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—Army General Martin Dempsey and his wife Deanie—pulled me aside at the Pentagon reception and remarked that they remembered reading about our program and how we've affected the lives of so many military families. "This is just the first step," General Dempsey said to me. "Now we need to meet their needs as they return and face a new life back from war."

Wow! Project EverGreen has a major role to play. And we will be there, helping families and promoting how important it is to have a managed green space from an environmental, economic and lifestyle standpoint. How proud TPI members must be to know that through their financial contribution to Project EverGreen, they are making a difference in the war on terrorism.

And don't think I didn't get goose bumps on the South Lawn of the White House when Dr. Biden, during her remarks, picked Project EverGreen and GreenCare for Troops as one of the three out of 20 she mentioned verbally to the audience. "Programs like GreenCare for Troops, a free lawn service for military families, helps make dreams come true," she said. ■

Reprinted with permission from Turf News. Den Gardner was the first executive director of Project EverGreen in 2003, and is currently is on the executive committee of Project EverGreen. He also serves as editor of the Turfgrass Producers International's Turf News. TPI has been a contributor in time, talent and funding for Project EverGreen since its first meeting 9 years ago in Minnesota. Executive Director Kirk Hunter has been active on Project EverGreen's officer committee for many years.