



# The making of a “champion” turf manager

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN** for an organization to recognize people with honors and awards? How does one get noticed or worthy of such attention? I look at the honors and awards I have received and ask a similar question. What did I do to deserve such attention and be recognized as among the best in the industry? I don't see myself as any more special than another person just as deserving.

When I take the time to look at my colleagues who have been recognized and honored I realize there is often a story to share. All stories are varied but it may be a story of humbleness, personal struggle, possibly even the story of a champion. Likely, several factors are involved. Usually it is a story of someone that stands out by not standing alone. Champions aren't ahead of others because of personal achievements. It is others that help them become champi-

ons, much like an athletic team.

People that help champions might be an association you belong to, a community, a church, a family, a college or university, business, a place of employment. People are there to help nurture and encourage those willing to make the commitment. These champions are noticed by organizations and associations as leaders whom their members can appreciate and strive to be more like.

Being a champion is nothing about being

better than the next person, nor even necessarily the best or most knowledgeable person in the industry. A champion is compassionate not only about one's self in what they do in life, family, community, and career but also compassionate about others and their lives. Such a person likely would have strong values, see and appreciate education and training, and have a good sense of humor. Champions may be certified in the many programs seen in organizations but not necessarily; certification programs are a good idea regardless. Champions may or may not have a post-high school degree. They often believe helping others will improve the industry for everyone. Champions are looked to as mentors and often serve as mentors to people in the industry of all ages. I see champions in the numerous associations in which I am involved. Many of you are champions and good leaders.

## MY STORY

I wasn't an exceptional student. I had average grades but did well in things that I had developed an interest or passion for. I had to learn as I went along in life and career; today I continue to learn. I had my personal struggles like many others. I do have a challenge that has been part of me all my life, severe bilateral hearing loss, but I don't see that making me different or more obligated than others. The hearing loss challenges me in ordinary conditions and much more in abnormal situations but the disability has never dampened my desire to learn or help others in the green industry profession.

I am from in a small town in northwest Minnesota called Crookston and stayed close to my roots in attending the University of Minnesota-Crookston. After 2 years, I received my associate degree in landscape, turf, and grounds. I followed my dream and moved my family to the Big Sky Country of Montana. I attended Montana State University in Bozeman, earning my bachelor's degree in landscape management. Before I moved to Bozeman, I was hired sight unseen by the grounds crew supervisor. It was my first opportunity to work for a large grounds keeping operation. I worked there for several years; eventually I was employed full time working all aspects of grounds operations.

Upon approaching my graduation date, I seriously considered a master's degree. I had a professor actively pursuing me and want-

ing to sponsor. I went through the testing process for graduate school. But I decided not to go, a decision that has stayed with me for a lifetime. I also decided should I become successful in my chosen career path, I would eventually participate in an association and give back to the industry.

I worked various positions over the years: university grounds technician, park supervisor, golf course superintendent, landscape and nursery foreman, municipal arborist, and grounds manager. Fifteen years after I graduated from Montana State, I sought to fulfill the commitment I made to serve. I was elected on a board of directors for the Association of Montana Turf, Ornamental, and Pest Professionals (AMTOPP). I have served on the board ever since, including two stints as president. I didn't stop there. I serve on an advisory board for the state forester on an association called Montana Urban and Community Forestry Association, including a 2-year term as chair. This group assists with urban and community forestry issues in Montana.

I am involved with both organizations

because I believe in the members and what we stand for. I have learned what it takes to serve an association membership; to work with a board of individuals, all with different interests, desires, and ideas. In this capacity, I worked on education, state and federal legislation in industry matters, networking with other organizations, budgets, community volunteer efforts, industry promotion, committees, speaking engagements, writing articles, anywhere where I am needed.

Five times during the 2000's, I went to Washington, DC on behalf of AMTOPP to participate in Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) Legislative Day on the Hill and volunteer at "Renewal and Remembrance" on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery. A few years ago, a good friend of mine, Dr. Robert Gough, associate dean of the College of Agriculture at Montana State, asked me to be a committee member on the College of Agriculture Academic Advisory Committee to discuss ways to enhance the agriculture industry which includes horticulture and the green industry. I am in my fourth year on this committee.

Dr. Bob, as he was affectionately known, passed away of cancer not too long ago. Being in a leadership capacity drives one to do better and be a better example of our industry, as he was. Compassion for my work in the green industry has carried over to me in my employment.

### DEDICATION TO THE JOB

In the late 90's, I was hired to be a grounds manager for Carroll College in Helena, MT. The college didn't have a full time grounds manager or a crew to work on grounds. Facilities personnel worked on the grounds with other duties besides grounds work. A nursery and landscape company served as a consultant for grounds operations. Student employees were frequently used with minimal direction and experience on day-to-day operations.

I basically started the operations from scratch. My budget was small with no money to purchase equipment. I had a utility vehicle, a multi-purpose mowing unit, a Jeep with a plow, and a sanding truck. The college was undergoing construction on a

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new stadium. This project was largely volunteers and donations. The campus center expansion project was just completed. There were new plans for an expansion to the science center and add a new residence hall.

I came into this job with a strong belief that I was hired to be more than just a grounds maintenance employee. I believe I was to be more than someone that made sure the grounds looked tended. I believe I was hired to fulfill a need; a part of a strategic plan of the college. I started using the words, "Department of First and Lasting Impressions." My mission was to help the college attract new students and parents, donors, and friends to the interests of the campus. I wanted them to be impressed with a community of a well landscaped and maintained campus. I wanted them to participate, to be drawn to the place with pride, and a sense of community belonging. I want the impressions to last a lifetime, a place where the alumni will always call home. A place the donor will believe their investments are well invested in future generations to assure the lasting integrity of the college community. Is that possible? I believe it then and I still do. Eventually, the department was supported with full-time employees and equipment to do the work.

When I submitted the application for STMA Field of the Year in 2006, I didn't know what to expect. I applied with reservation as I was nominating myself. I thought however, how anyone would know about our facility in the middle of Montana if I didn't share? I wanted to bring national attention to Carroll College. Carroll College had been enjoying success from its NAIA National Championship football team. They had won four straight national championships. My crew and I helped support the team through long seasons into December by assuring a quality field for them to play. The woman's soccer team used the facility too. They also enjoyed successful seasons going well into November.

Every year, I came to the athletic department asking for money to maintain the field that was getting much use well after growing season was finished. My plan focused on basic agronomy with no frills as I knew funds were tight. Carroll College is only 15 miles from the Continental Divide at an elevation of nearly 4,000 feet above sea level.

The stadium field is a native soil field with an 8.3 pH. The annual precipitation rate is 12.25 inches. I have an automatic irrigation system designed to my specifications so I can irrigate with a balance program. My plan consisted of aeration, aeration, and aeration along with overseeding with sport field blue-grass blends, topdress with as close to USGA sand as I could afford blended with Dakota Soil Enhancer 90/10, and fertilizer. On the stadium field, I remove weeds by hand.

In 2007, I had budget issues. I was not able to hire students for the summer. My full time crew and I came up with a summer plan. They would maintain the irrigation system, take care of events, do the maintenance, we prioritized daily. I hired an outside mowing contractor to mow 2/3 of the campus once a week. I would maintain the athletic fields including the mowing. That summer, I worked 7 days a week as much as 16 hours a day. I didn't allow much time for myself. It was record heat for Helena. The month of July saw 28 days in the 90's and 5 of those days in the 100's. August and September weren't much better. We watched forest fires on the mountainsides around the valley. The valley often filled with smoke from those fires. It was a tough summer to work but the athletic fields were ready for the coming season. The woman's soccer team went 17-2-2 that season. They went to the national tournament only to lose during the final four. The football team won their 5th NAIA national championship. The field held up.

I was awarded the 2007 STMA College and University Soccer Field of the Year, and I went on to receive the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) Grand Award in the Athletic Field Category, and was recognized by Pioneer Athletics "Field of Excellence" award. I was called upon to speak in Montana and nationally. In 2008, I was nominated to be on the PGMS board of directors and now am serving my second 3-year term. I continue my involvement with STMA on the Chapter Relations committee for 3 years and now serve on the Membership committee.

I am a believer in networking. I believe green industry associations are often working on common ground. Communication is key to promoting the green industry and working on promoting and using sustainable

practices in a consciously aware society. Our industry is often viewed with objective scrutiny. It is important to realize our industry has been the environmental stewards long before today's challenges. I believe we need to share the message with the public. I often notice, when I am working on one thing I find I am usually doing something for many.

Last spring, I received notice from my alma mater, the University of Minnesota-Crookston that I had been nominated to receive Outstanding Alumni of the Year. The outstanding Alumni Award is the highest honor bestowed on UMC alumni by the faculty, staff, administration and alumni at UMC. This award recognizes alumni who have displayed exemplary commitment and service to community, church, education, family or in their occupational field.

A month later I attended the PGMS School of Grounds Management & GIE+EXPO in Louisville, where I was honored with one of the Society's prestigious awards, the PGMS President's Award. The PGMS President's Award is awarded by the PGMS President to a member or members they feel has shown outstanding service and contributions to the Society.

As you can see, I didn't get where I am at, alone. Sure I put in much hard work, long hours, made sacrifices, and had to overcome personal challenges that may come easy for some. I can reflect on many experiences involving my parents, family, spouse, educators, friends, supportive supervisors, co-workers and associations. There have been people that helped motivate me and encourage me along; mentors each of you. I think you can see my life has been rather simple. Do you have an interest to participate and serve in improving our way of life and the industry what we believe in, the American Dream? I hope sharing a part of my life story with you; one might see making achievements is doable. Becoming a champion is just beyond the achievements. I have been deeply blessed with family, friends, close colleagues, and national recognition beyond expectation. All I wanted to do was give back. ■

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