



SHERYL NADLER, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Hank Gelderman, president of Jan Gelderman Landscaping, values his employees so much some have stayed for 30 years. The company, in a business that is typically seasonal, offers year-round employment, health benefits, an RSP and profit-sharing.

# GROWING GREEN

*Waterdown landscaper's business has doubled in five years*

BY MEREDITH MacLEOD

The red, shiny pickup trucks line up by the dozens in the parking lot at Jan Gelderman Landscaping. Big Fords, Chevys and Dodges emblazoned with the company's yellow and green logo sit idle because this is a cold, rainy fall day and most of the crews aren't out.

Hank Gelderman remembers when there was just one truck, driven by his dad, Jan Gelderman, a Dutch immigrant who started his business in Waterdown in 1955.

When the elder Gelderman had to be hospitalized for severe asthma, 12-year-old Hank got to work. His mother hired a driver for the truck, but Hank did the cutting, the digging, the planting. Jan died in 1993 and though the name remains the same, just about everything else has changed.

Hank, who took over the business in 1976, has built a company that runs just fine without him.

"I'm just one spoke in the wheel. This is a bottom-up company. I empower my staff."

Good bosses focus on encouraging their employees, says Gelderman. They don't dwell on mistakes, but highlight what's done right.

"When you do that, people make more right decisions."

The company does it all, from design and construction to maintenance, turf management and snow removal. There is also a separate lawn care company — Green Meadows Lawn Care.

A lot of companies talk about putting their employees first, but Jan Gelderman seems to live it.

There are company dinners every year and once a month, Gelderman breaks out the barbecue and some beer and cooks for his staff of 65.

When the company office moved out of Gelderman's basement into a large, new three storey building next door in 2000, he included showers and lockers for employees and a staff lounge with gym equipment and a TV.

He encourages any employee to take training courses, which he happily pays for.

"I've been given the stewardship of this business and I'm so thankful for that. I want my staff to grow along with it."

Most importantly, Gelderman, 53, was among the very first landscapers to give full-time employment to his workers close to 30 years ago. It's a seasonal business and the norm is to bring people on during busy times and lay them off when it's not. After a year of good employment at JGL, a worker can move to full-time, year-round with health benefits, an RSP and profit-sharing. Em-

**Biggest challenge:**

"Getting the right people for the right job. We're quite successful with that but it's still a big challenge. And you have to keep things challenging for your staff. You can't let them get bored."

**Biggest surprise:**

"When I started as a teenager, I expected to have to work very hard physically all my life. I was willing to do that and get old fast. I haven't had to do that. I've had a beautiful, wonderful, rewarding life."

**Best decision:**

"The best decision was to get someone to take my spot as operations manager. That empowers someone else to run my company. It has allowed me to do charity work and enjoy vacations."

**Worst decision:**

"We had a computer program designed a number of years ago. It cost me \$100,000. It kept going up and up and never really materialized completely. We're getting someone else to do it now and expect to have it next year."

**Best advice to give:**

"Make sure you don't invest all your money in your company. Diversify outside it, whether it's real estate or investing in other companies. That will get you through the bad times. You don't want to sink or swim with your company."

**Best advice received:**

"The goal of most leaders is to get people to think highly of the leader. But the goal of the exceptional leader is to get people to think highly of themselves. That quote (by Robert Weyland) hangs on my

wall because that's what I truly believe. You need to empower people."

**Learn the most:**

"I'm self-taught. I learned a lot from my Uncle Dick and my dad. I've always gone to the chapter meetings of Landscape Ontario and I've taken courses at Humber College. I always look for positive people and get their advice. I learn from my staff, too."

**Secret to success:**

"Dedication. Good work ethics. Service, service, service. And faith."

ployees basically deposit time over the slow winter months that they work off during the summer.

"It's how we've kept our staff, some for 25 or 30 years. They want full-time, steady work."

JGL's seven-hectare Waterdown property includes Gelderman's own residence, as well as a large pond, waterfall and gazebo, where 800 people enjoyed the company's 50th anniversary party in August.

"It takes go power to last 50 years. There is only one direction. We always like to say, 'The Lord provides, now get to work.'"

When Gelderman assumed the lead of the company at 24, there were three employees and he knew his dad expected him to expand the business. But Jan, a tough, hard-working man who helped anyone in need, let his son go it alone.

"I could hang myself or make a go of it. He was there for support, but I had to stand on my own two feet."

Since then, Gelderman says, there has been a wholesale change in how people view landscaping. It's far beyond cutting grass and pulling weeds. Homeowners want stone patios, gazebos, elaborate barbecues and water features.

"In the design and the materials, there's no comparison to what we did 25 or 30 years ago."

The company has almost doubled in size since 2000, although Gelderman doesn't want to talk about revenue. He stresses that his company is

built on a strong faith. He says values and morals are the foundation of society, from families to businesses to communities and nations. The company's values, along with a well-trained staff, give Gelderman comfort that he can take 16 weeks of vacation, mostly spent on motorcycle trips with wife, Jacoba.

The couple has five children, none of whom as so far shown any interest in getting involved in the family business.

JGL won readers' choice awards from the Flamborough Review, Oakville Beaver and Burlington Post this year, added to many awards for design and maintenance from Landscape Ontario. The company has also won awards for community service and labour relations from the Flamborough Chamber of Commerce. Gelderman is also proud of its role as an employer with the Hamilton Skilled Trades Alliance and the YMCA youth program.

He's an active volunteer himself, including acting as treasurer for a Christian high school and a nursing home. Gelderman is also a consultant for existing and new businesses.

"We need more mentoring among companies. We need to help people starting their own business because we all have to compete with the world."

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