

# ACUTABOVE

GREEN INDUSTRY MAINTENANCE LEADERS » BY MARISA PALMIERI

**Zack Kline**, 23, exudes enthusiasm when he speaks about his company, A.I.R. Lawn Care, based in Montgomery County, Md. His 1-year-old business is green in more ways than one: A.I.R. stands for “atmosphere improvement and renewal.” The company is living up to its name with its battery-powered handheld equipment, solar-paneled truck and an electric commercial-grade mower.

The idea for the company was born a few years ago when Kline was working on a landscape crew on a 95-degree, “code red” day, trimming a 2.5-acre property with traditional equipment. As an operator, the noise and emissions bothered him. He recalls thinking, “There has to be a better way.”

Last year Kline entered and won a business plan competition at Salisbury University, where he studied marketing and information systems. He took home the \$5,000 prize, which he used to get his business off the ground.

While growing his company (it’s still a part-time effort) and working a full-time job at a payroll company, Kline is researching organic fertilization and mosquito control services, and he’s networking as much as possible. He’s a member of Bethesda Green, a sustainable business incubator, and the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). He’s also busy forging partnerships and personal relationships with clients, peers and suppliers.

Take Stihl, for example. After looking into equipment options to fit his business plan, Kline decided on Stihl products. He did some research, learned that Stihl President Fred Whyte was a bagpipe player, and sent him a pair of bagpipe cuff links, along with a hand-written note introducing himself. Whyte called Kline to thank him for his gift and learn more about his company. Then he introduced him to Roger Phelps, Stihl’s promotional communications manager. After reviewing Kline’s business plan, Stihl decided to help him out by giving him several pieces of its Battery KombiSystem products. Phelps also introduced him to PLANET, which donated a one-year complimentary membership. Kline is taking advantage, having attended the association’s Renewal & Remembrance and Legislative Day on the Hill events in July; he’s also preparing to take the Landscape Industry Certified Manager exam in October.



Zack Kline’s firm is green in more ways than one.

## INSIDE INFO

**Company:** A.I.R. Lawn Care

**Headquarters:** Montgomery County, Md.

**Employees:** 1

**Key to being a maintenance leader:** I’m pretty big on quotes, and one I’ve taken to heart that my fraternity brother shared with me is, “It’s not what you know and who you know, but who knows you.” Trying to do this at such a young age, I see things coming together with networking and building relationships. Another one is, “Just show up,” which is what Woody Allen said. “Ninety percent of success is showing up.” And the other 10 percent is being prepared.

## TOP TREND

» **Sustainability.** Maybe I’m a little biased, but I’d say companies are trying to be more sustainable, and customers are, too. For example, in Montgomery County there are ordinances that prevent you from using certain equipment during certain hours for blowers and trimmers. With the green technology that’s available, as the battery life improves, that will be the new trend because it’s less fuel consumption, there are zero emissions and you get the same quality.

## TOP OBSTACLE

» **Time is the biggest obstacle for me.** I’m devoting a lot of my time to my full-time job, but I’m

always hungry to be doing stuff for my business. I hope to go full time next season. I’m in the process of getting a loan set up for next season so I can purchase more capital and take on employees. That way I can focus on behind-the-scenes business development.

For the industry, it’s being able to convert over to green equipment. Everyone has a lot of time and infrastructure invested in gas-powered equipment. It’s tough for owners, managers and crew leaders to be convinced about converting over. It’s about accepting change. One quote I was taught is, “Change is inevitable, but growth is optional.”

## TOP OPPORTUNITY

» **Education.** I have a great opportunity to provide an environmentally friendly service and educate people about the benefits. In lawn maintenance, many people just want their grass cut and for it to be green and pristine. They may not recognize the impact of everyone doing that. The EPA says that 5 percent to 10 percent of pollution comes from handheld power equipment.

The industry has the opportunity, too, to educate consumers and each other, and we all have the opportunity to learn about how we can be more sustainable with everything we do.