

Michael Bellantoni has seen a lot in the 59 years he's worked in landscaping (49 owning his own company). And he's reminded of his start daily. "On the wall in front of me is a frame with three invoices," he says. "I had a client who was my father's. After my father passed away, they asked if I would take over their property. She was cleaning the attic and found some old bills." There's one dated 1964. Bellantoni shares how his business and the industry have changed during the nearly six decades he's been in it.

How did you get involved in the business? I actually worked for my father who was a landscape gardener in White Plains. I mowed lawns and I cleaned leaves, back when there was no power equipment. Everything was done by hand. Back then we burned leaves in driveways. When I left high school, I went into the Navy.

How did you get back into the business? My dad got sick and asked me if I would help him. I worked with him for a year until he got better. After the year, I realized two things. I didn't want to work indoors and I certainly didn't want to work for my father. He was a tough guy to work for. With that, I started my own business. There were about 12 accounts that I achieved for him in the year that I worked with him. I took those accounts. He didn't give me any blessings whatsoever. He said, 'you're going to fail.'

But you didn't fail? I went back to school and completed an accounting major and continued studying in the horticultural

field. After the first year, I got 20 more accounts. And the next year I got 20 more accounts. I was growing in leaps and bounds.

How has your business evolved? As I grew, my purpose was to offer everything to the client. I would take care of your lawn, your trees, your driveway. We do blacktopping. We got into all the new materials. I always wanted to provide our client with everything. It's been successful. Most of our clientele we give full service.

How would you describe your market? Our marketplace here is strong. This area of the country White Plains, NY — it is the third most expensive city to live in in the United States. I probably have \$4 million in real estate to run my little company. What I could do with that money somewhere in the Midwest would be phenomenal. We took a hit in 2007 and 2008 when the market dropped out, but we've bounced back this year.

What is your customer base like? We have an upscale

clientele. We're not your mow and blow guys. We like to pick our clients; we like to give them exceptional service and handle all of their needs from flower planting to grounds maintenance to doing their masonry, irrigation, lighting. That's working well for us. Eighty-seven percent of phone calls for new business are referrals.

What have you seen in your nearly five decades as a business owner? Years ago it was a handshake and a nod. You did a job and you got paid. If there were issues you worked them out. Doing business today is completely different. We have to write proposals. We need to get written authorizations. We need sign-off sheets on completion because we want to get paid. Today, there are great clients out there, but every once in a while you run across a few that intentionally want to give you a tough time on getting paid for your services.

I love coming to work and I love interacting with clients. I love helping people with their problems. I get the greatest satisfaction out of



AT A GLANCE

TITLE: President and CEO

COMPANY: Michael Bellantoni Inc.

YEAR FOUNDED: 1963 (Incorporated in 1983)

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 59

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), New York State Turf and Landscape Association (NYSTLA), International Facility Managers Association (IFMA) Westchester Business Council; Commanding Officer (Captain) in White Plains Auxiliary Police Department

EDUCATION: Graduated from HS. Went into the Navy. Two years at Westchester Community College. Has taken decades of continuing education classes.

HOBBIES: Golf, and sports in general

FAMILY: daughter Denise; sons Michael, Mark and Matthew; and married 48 years to Karen

WEBSITE: www.mblandscape.com

accomplishing things. I love coming up with a proposal and it solves the problem. I look forward to that, meeting the challenges. What knocks you down is the aggravation — the HR problems, the bill collection problems, employees not following our guidelines.