

A ripple effect

One neighbor's goodwill has led to much greater giving. BY CASEY PAYTON

In 2009, a new client asked Utopian Landscapes in Harrisburg, Pa., to put together a holiday lighting proposal for a struggling neighbor's home. That act of goodwill created a ripple effect that led to the creation of a grant program serving many others in need. Today that sentiment has spread even farther.

"When he asked us to put together some prices for his neighbor, we figured he'd do a small \$200 or \$300

job," says Utopian President Nikos Floros Phelps. "But he came back and said, 'Do all of it,' which worked out to almost \$2,000. We realized that if our client could do something so generous, as a business we owed it to our community to find ways that we could give back."

Today, the Donald Phelps Christmas Grant, named after Phelps' late grandfather, allows members of the community to nominate deserving individuals for complimentary holiday lighting.

Of the families the grant has served since its inception, one story in particular stands out: that of a woman who suffers from multiple sclerosis and her daughter, both of whom were attacked by a stray dog. Due to complications from the attack, the woman's hospital expenses were astronomical. The family was nominated for and received the holiday lighting grant. When Phelps delivered the good news, the woman felt there were others who were more deserving.

"She is always giving back to others," says Phelps. "In fact, when another client of mine found out about her story, he



During PLANET's Day of Service in 2011, Utopian helped build an outdoor classroom at a Harrisburg, Pa., school.

gave me an enormous jar of change and bills—something he called his 'Christmas jar.' ... But when the woman received the money—which might have been \$1,000—she donated half of that to a local food bank because she felt that there were people who were in even greater need than her."

It's stories like these that have inspired Phelps to create other giving opportunities. The Yanniss Floros Landscaping Grant, named for Phelps' late uncle, donates landscape maintenance services to a family in need, and the Dina Tourli Grant, named for Phelps' late, civic-minded aunt, is a huge community-based project done every few years.

Phelps and his crew also participate in Christmas Decor's Decorated Family Program, donating holiday lighting for families of deployed service members.

Phelps says that when he first started the charity work he wondered whether his

crew members would be on board. "We weren't sure how they would respond to it," he recalls. "But it was obvious they embraced the idea as much as we did."

"It's a great feeling you get when you can help someone who is struggling in life," says Utopian landscape foreman Ryan Danner. "To be able to see a smile on their face when they are going through hardships is phenomenal. It has given me a great sense of pride in myself and the company to be able to help those in need."

Phelps says he's already seen some of the positive effects of the goodwill he's spread—which all started from one neighbor wanting to help a fellow neighbor. He hopes that even more people will be inspired. "Could you imagine how much could get done in a community if every company did just one volunteer effort?" muses Phelps. "We think that would be pretty amazing." LMI

AT A GLANCE

Company: Utopian Landscapes

Headquarters: Harrisburg, Pa.

President: Nikos Phelps

SELECT PROJECT LISTING:

▶ **Utopian Grant Program**—three grants provide landscape services to those in need

▶ **Decorated Family Program**—as a franchisee of Christmas Decor, provides holiday decorating for the families of deployed service members

▶ **ABC's Extreme Makeover: Home Edition**—served as co-lead for the Etters, Pa., project in 2011

▶ **PLANET Day of Service**—conducts an annual, one-day cleanup or installation for a school, park or family

▶ **PLANET Renewal & Remembrance**—participates in Arlington National Cemetery service project

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