

In the spirit of the season, I want to share a story about a man who received a special gift a little more than a year ago. The gift was not a flashy watch or a spiffy sport jacket. In fact, the gift was something intangible. The man was given the gift of a chance to do something he had always wanted to do.

It was a gift the man will never forget and always appreciate — especially around this time of year when all of us should count our blessings.

Dieumerite Etienne, the man who received the gift, is 38 years old and hails from Haiti. Etienne entered the United States as an illegal alien in 1986 when he was a teenager.

Etienne's mother, realizing her smartest of five children would have a better chance of living a more fruitful life in America, put Etienne on a boat headed for the land of hope and dreams. Etienne, whose father had died a few years before, had a relative in Florida who put him up in his house.

Etienne was only 17 at the time. He didn't speak English. His new world was a lost world. He struggled. He scraped. But he persevered.

Etienne landed a job with a local landscaper. He worked hard and learned the craft. He was promoted to foreman. Etienne made \$5 an hour and sent much of his money back home to his mother and siblings.

Etienne kept very busy, wanting badly to make something of himself. He went to school every day after work to learn English. He stayed out of trouble.

In 1987, Etienne took a job on the golf course maintenance crew at the Broken Sound Club, a 36-hole country in Boca Raton, Fla. Having learned English — and being the only one who could translate what the large Haitian crew at the club was saying — Etienne was a valuable employee.

He was promoted at the club — first to crew leader and then to irrigation tech, making \$7 an hour in the latter position. Etienne enjoyed the golf maintenance field. He became an expert in irrigation. He fancied thoughts of one day becoming a golf course superintendent.

For years, Etienne watched superintendents and assistant superintendents come and go

Getting the Gift of Opportunity

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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from Broken Sound. And he watched them be replaced by others. It was disappointing to be passed over time and again, but Etienne kept his composure — hopeful that his time would come ... someday, somewhere.

In 2004, Joe Hubbard was hired at the Broken Sound Club as director of golf course maintenance overseeing the club's two tracks — the Club Course and the Old Course. Hubbard, seeing the time that Etienne had put in at Broken Sound, quickly promoted him to assistant superintendent of the Club Course.

And then in the fall of 2007, the superintendent of the Old Course left Broken Sound and the superintendent of the Club Course was named to replace him, leaving an opening for superintendent at the Club Course. It was then that Hubbard called Etienne into his office and gave him the gift — the promotion to superintendent of the Club Course.

Etienne was as thankful as a kid who found a new train set — the present he most wanted — under his tree on Christmas morning.

It has been more than a year, and Etienne remains gracious to Hubbard for giving him a chance. Hubbard says the gift was well deserved.

Yes, Etienne struggled in his first year and learned how stressful it can be as the top dog at a private course. Most every superintendent experiences those high and lows.

"It has been a tough year," Etienne admits. "But I made it. And I look forward to making it another year, another year and another year."

Etienne reminds us all how we should appreciate the real gifts in our lives. The gift of work. The gift of getting the chance to make a difference.

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