



## Setting a Tone for the Next Generation of Professionals

By Dr. Frank S. Rossi

My early years on the golf course were filled with curiosity about the land. Growing up in the metropolitan New York area I found the golf course to be a place to wonder about plants and animals. Eventually at age 15, I recognized the golfer and green committee as part of the ecosystem. It was then I remember viewing the superintendent from a different perspective. My curiosity about turf began to grow as I noticed the less-than-professional tone that the superintendent set with the staff.

I recall sifting around the shop for turf magazines and sometimes pulling a few out of the trash (of course there was an assortment of alternative literature around the shop as well). My curiosity always led me to the *Green Section Record*; *Weeds, Trees and Turf* (now called *Landscape Management*), and the GCSAA's *Golf Course Management*. I remember thinking that these magazines depicted superintendents in a way that seemed more respectable than what I had known.

After high school, I was off to junior college at SUNY Cobleskill and met Bob Emmons and I knew what I wanted to do. Bob, a former superintendent turned educator, became my first mentor that lit the fire inside me. My first formal step into the profession was signing up for the turf class and joining the GCSAA. When my membership card arrived, it was a big deal. I hadn't had any other type of card other than my license and now I felt like I belonged to something bigger than me (it wasn't long after that the credit card companies got to me).

The next summer, on the same golf course I started my career from, I began to question the way things were done and was promptly terminated. I had reached a turning point in my career. The fire wasn't out; rather, it was smoldering. I wondered why there was such a gap between the way in which I read about the professional superintendent and what I knew first hand. The gap would close the following season.

My next stop was at a course with golf course managers who liked talking turf; my fire was re-ignited. The superintendent and assistant set a professional tone and the staff responded in kind. For example, the assistant graphed the daily temperature and disease problems on a wall chart and I remember keeping a look out for observations to add. I had my curiosity peaked and I had respect for the professionals I worked for.

I experienced some harsh reality as an assistant superintendent. I came out of college as most young people do, filled with ideas and ready to put some of my knowledge to work. I think about how different my career might have been if my enthusiasm was embraced and directed instead of squashed. I became frustrated and disillusioned with the profession. I decided I really loved the work, but wanted to contribute to the profession at a different level.

Off to grad school I went and ran head on into John Jagschitz (Jaggie), a weed scientist who embraced my interest and let me learn from him. I maintained my golf course hours (up and in at 5am) and Jaggie and I spent many an early morning at the turf research farm talking turf and statistics. Among Jaggie, Dr. Skogley and Dr. Jackson, the tone of excellence in the turfgrass information area was set and I felt a part of it.

The remainder of my formal education and early academic career brought me in contact with professionals who taught me the value of leading by example. Joe Neal, my Ph.D. advisor, taught me about critical thinking; Joanne G, an extension associate at Cornell, taught me about educational programming. At Michigan State, I was surrounded by talent in many different forms; the flamboyant and free thinking plant pathologist, the keen intellectual physiologist, the wise and thoughtful soils extension leader and the sharp educational promoter. Each set a tone in their area that demanded quality and respect. I am a better professional and

person for those years. Who set a tone for you?

In my years as an extension guy and now having the opportunity to serve on national committees I am regularly impressed by the professionals I meet. They come in many different forms. Not everyone has to serve at the national level; rather, it is more that you do something to contribute to the profession. If that is inspiring a person with some interest, then direct them towards some formal education. It might be working with the local boy scout troop building bird houses, or writing an article for the church newsletter on something that interests you. Set a tone in your community and with your staff. As I always say, being a professional is more than wearing a tie.

I left out an important aspect of my experience. Along the way I learned an important personal lesson; all work and no family makes Frank no fun to be around. I lost sight of the important balance between a career and family. I still notice today, how the instant gratification of the financial and professional rewards distract me from my long term commitment and the long lasting value of setting a loving tone with my family. Sometimes I can get so distracted I forget how much I miss each day I'm not engaged in family stuff. I'm not just talking about showing up for dance recitals or soccer games. I'm talking about reading to my daughter at night, planning a garden with my wife, playing crazy eights, etc.. It's not just physically being there; it's being engaged and demonstrating your commitment (not just saying it, but doing it). I realize this more these days as Barbara, Danielle and I expect the arrival of our second child this summer.

Think about the tone you set with your life. Do people you work and live with feel like they're a part of what goes on? Or is everyone just delegated a task leaving the communication to be in one direction? I know I would not be where I am today without being involved with people who openly shared information and who genuinely cared for my input. It might be more difficult than one-way communication but we run the risk of leaving a legacy of professionals and people who won't survive the changes ahead. Set the tone now. 🌱