

# He Took a Chance for What He Wants

by Lori Ward Bocher

Life has taken some interesting and ironic turns for Dr. Chris Williamson as he's slowly discovered his career niche.

- At 18 years of age, he didn't want to go to college; now he has a Ph.D.
- He found it frustrating trying to find a job as a golf course superintendent upon receiving a BS degree because those who were hiring at the time said he was too qualified; but he did find a superintendent's job after receiving his Ph.D.
- Two jobs in industry convinced him that he was better suited

to academics – enough so that he was willing to gamble on a soft-money, non-tenured track job at the UW.

Not that this was his only opportunity to get into academics. "I had several other opportunities for interviews. And, upon being hired here, another institution asked me to apply," Chris points out. But he came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison as the new turf and ornamental entomologist. Hired in December of 1998, he's in the position formerly held by Dr. Chuck Koval.

"I came here for several rea-

sons," Chris points out. "I felt good about the opportunities here and the people here. After all, the UW is rated Number 3 in the country in terms of research. And, from a personal standpoint, it's a nice place to raise a family."

### He took a gamble...

"But I took a chance by coming here because there are no guarantees," he continues. "My position is non-tenured, supported by soft money (industry supported, not university supported). Three years from now, when the money the university has allocated for this position is gone, I may not have a job."



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He's hoping that this won't be so. And he's enthusiastically jumping into his new position. "My first impressions have all been very favorable, very positive," Chris says. "Aesthetically, Wisconsin is a beautiful state and very diverse. The university has treated me very, very well. I know that I have the support of my department; even though I'm not a tenured track faculty member, they treat me as if I am."

"Without the support of the industry, my position wouldn't exist," Chris continues. "But I look at it this way: At least my foot is in the door. If you make yourself known and have a good track record, sometimes universities will do what they have to do to keep you. Then again, they may say, 'It was nice having you work for us. See you around.'" Chris is betting on the former.

#### **Agricultural background...**

Chris has had several academic and job experiences since graduating from high school in 1983. Born and raised in Defiance, Ohio (near Toledo), he grew up in a rural area and spent lots of summers working on his uncle's 3,000-acre farm of corn, soybeans and alfalfa. "That's what stimulated my interest in agriculture," Chris points out.

However, with no farm in his immediate family, he searched for other agricultural venues. "When I found out about the turfgrass industry, I knew that it was an avenue I could effectively pursue," Chris adds. "But I didn't want to go to college. So I got a two-year associate's degree in turfgrass management from Clark Technical College, which is now known as Clark State Community College."

Upon graduation, he was hired as an assistant superintendent at Kettnering Country Club, a private, 18-hole course at Defiance, Ohio. The superintendent there saw some potential in Chris and encour-

aged him to go back to school to earn a BS degree. So, after two years on the golf course, he went to The Ohio State University where he received a BS in agronomy/turfgrass science in 1989.

"Well, I got out, and nobody wanted to hire me as a superintendent," Chris recalls. "If they were looking for someone to hire, they'd say I had too much experience. If they weren't looking for someone to hire, they'd say that they'd love to hire me but didn't have a job for me. Maybe I wasn't patient enough, but I decided to go to work for a chemical company, Ciba-Geigy (now Novartis). I worked in sales for agricultural products, not turf products, and covered southeastern Indiana."

It wasn't his niche. Chris was at the job for only two years. "I learned very quickly that I'm not a sales-oriented individual," he admits. "Sales is just not for me. That's the bottom line. It wouldn't matter if I'd be selling shoes to people who really need them. I don't like sales."

#### **Back to school...**

So he returned to Ohio State to pursue an MS degree in the area of turfgrass, choosing an entomology specialty because he liked the advisor in that discipline and there was an opening for a graduate student there. Not only did he earn his MS in December of 1993, but he went on to earn a Ph.D. by December of 1996. He was finding his niche.

Ironically, after receiving his Ph.D., he went to work as a golf course superintendent. "While conducting some research at a golf course, I developed a good rapport with the owner of the course" Chris explains. "As soon as I got my Ph.D., he asked me if I would be his superintendent. So I worked for him for six months with the intention of finding an academic position or industry job, which he knew I would do."

In June of 1996, he was hired by TruGreen-ChemLawn as a research scientist in the area of turfgrass and ornamental entomology. And, once again, he discovered that an industry job is not his niche. "My job was to evaluate products that provided quality performance and that were cost-effective," he says. "Companies are in the 'business' to generate revenue. That's the bottom line."

"Universities are not in the business to make money. They provide people with the knowledge, information and tools necessary so that they can do their jobs to the best of their abilities," Chris believes. "I'd rather be the one producing that information, be an information generator."

So in December of 1998 he came to Madison where he once again has found a comfortable niche. Chris' position is 100 percent Extension, although he has an unwritten agreement that he will also be expected to conduct research.

#### **Goal oriented...**

Chris has specific projects planned for his new position. One of his goals is to develop a turfgrass

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bulletin that will be sent to turf-grass managers. "I'm working on that with Dr. John Stier," Chris explains. "It will be an interdepartmental, multi-faceted bulletin, with insects, weeds and diseases. It should be ready to go by this fall.

"John Stier and I are also developing a distance learning course entitled, 'holistic turf pest management,'" he continues. "If the system is in balance, theoretically you should have fewer pests and you can substantially reduce the amount of inputs. That's why I like the term 'holistic'. Maybe we should call it holistic plant management.

"We're going to offer this course not only to registered students at the UW and Madison Area Technical College, but also to any person who wants to take it for

noncredit purposes, such as golf course superintendents, lawn care people, landscapers," he adds.

Another goal for Chris is to build his reputation both in the state and nationally. "I want to present annually at the various turfgrass conferences, shows and short courses," he says. "And I want to publish one article per year in a refereed publication, whether or not I'm tenured. It's also my goal to make this position a tenured-track position. And I would like to see it be somewhere between 60 to 70 percent Extension and 30 to 40 percent research. I believe that an Extension person should have to conduct research in order to bring forth solid, viable recommendations."

#### **Black cutworm research...**

While in graduate school, Chris

researched the behavior and ecology of the black cutworm in golf course turf. His work was published in refereed journals and in Golf Course Management and The USGA Green Section Record. "Very little was known about the black cutworm in golf course turf, which is why I elected to study it," Chris explains.

"One of the things I learned was that most eggs are laid up on the tips of leaf blades," he continues. "I hypothesized that you can remove most of the eggs via the mowing process on putting greens, which are typically mowed seven days a week. I tested that hypothesis and, indeed, up to 95 percent of the eggs are removed that way.

"I also looked at insect/plant interactions," Chris adds. "In the



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turfgrass arena, there are endophytic plants that act as symbionts with host plants. They don't harm the plants. In fact, they're beneficial because they produce toxins that can be detrimental to insects.

"It was generalized that endophytic turfgrasses were resistant to black cutworms. But I wanted to challenge that because it had been extrapolated from other related species," he continues. "As I found out in my experiments, indeed, those plants are not resistant. They are very susceptible to black cutworm damage. The endophytes did not have a negative impact.

"I also found out that Kentucky bluegrass, which was once thought of as a very suitable host, is indeed an unsuitable host," Chris points out. "That was a major discovery. Now my question is, 'What is the mechanism of resistance that Kentucky bluegrass has that these other grasses don't have?' I hope to work on that here at UW."

**Tough challenges...**

As an entomologist, Chris sees the FQPA (Food Quality Protection Act) as the major challenge facing turfgrass managers today. "It's starting to and will impact turfgrass managers as the EPA begins to eliminate several pesticides available for use," he points out. "They're going to have to rely much more upon scouting and monitoring practices because their arsenal of products will be more limited."

He's also worried about the establishment of the Japanese beetle in Wisconsin. "It's been found in Eau Claire and Beloit, and it has really taken over in those areas," he warns.

**Likes the out-of-doors...**

Chris likes to spend his personal time out-of-doors. "I'm definitely an outdoorsman," he admits. "I like golfing, camping, hiking, kayaking, canoeing, hunting, snowmobiling and any kind of water sport. I used

to be a competitive water skier. I also like weight lifting."

Chris lives in Stoughton with his wife, Amy, and their 2-year-old son, Jacob. "I love it there," he says of

his new life among the Norwegians. If things go his way and he finds a tenured career niche, he'll be there more than three years. ♣

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