



# “If It Were Too Easy, Everybody Could Do It”

By Lori Ward Bocher

The entrepreneurial, philanthropic, and relational spirits are alive and well in Terry Kurth. He thrives on starting new businesses and watching them grow. He's deeply satisfied by giving his time, talents and treasures whole-heartedly to causes in which he believes. He puts his family high on his list of priorities and is quick to credit his wife, former bosses and university researchers for helping him get to where he is today.

Just listening to this Type-A personality talk about his life can tire out the Type-B personalities among us. But his voice is calm and sure and his demeanor is modest as he tells his life story. “I like a challenge,” Terry admits. “One of the things I remind myself when I get frustrated is, ‘Well, if it were too easy, everybody could do it.’ I am a competitor, whether it's on the golf course or in business.

“And I absolutely enjoy people,” he continues. “When people ask me to define my success, the thing I'm most proud of, besides my family, is the tremendous amount of friends I have. I tell my kids all the time, ‘Money can buy a lot of things, but respect isn't one of them.’ I would like to think that I'm respected within the industry. That's extremely important to me and I'm proud of that.”

At the age of 51, Terry has 25 years of experience in the lawn care business. Currently his entrepreneurial spirit lives through his role as Director of Development for Weed Man Lawn Care, a Canadian-based company that recently moved into the U.S. His philanthropic spirit was lifted by a recent \$150,000 gift to help endow the “Terry and Kathleen Kurth Wisconsin Distinguished Graduate Fellowship



in Turfgrass Management' at the UW-Madison. And his relational spirit exploded with the birth of his first grandchild this summer.

### **Madison native...**

But how did he get to this point in his life? Terry was born on the east side of Madison in 1953 where he attended school through the 5th grade. Then his father built a new home near Pine Bluff which is straight west of Madison, about seven miles from the beltline. He graduated from Mt. Horeb High School in 1971. “I met my wife, Kathy, in high school,” he points out. “I took her to Homecoming my senior year.”

Terry always knew he'd attend the UW-Madison. But he wasn't so sure about his choice of major. “I thought about ag engineering, maybe designing sewage treatment plants or something like that,” he recalls. “But I decided that the math requirements weren't my bailiwick. I enjoyed an introductory course in agronomy and after my freshman year I

worked one summer at the UW Ag Research Station in Arlington.

“My sophomore year I took a soils course with Dr. J.R. Love,” Terry continues. “He talked some about golf course work. He was like a mentor to me. He literally drove me out to Nakoma Country Club for an interview with Jerry O'Donnell who was superintendent there at the time. I was hired and worked there the summer of 1973 and 1974 and through the winter of 1974-75 with Randy Smith as the superintendent. I had no sooner been hired by Jerry when he moved to Scotts, Randy came to Nakoma, and Monroe Miller was hired at Blackhawk. So I've known and respected those guys forever. Randy was just an outstanding boss and gave me great training.”

### **Former superintendent...**

That training came in handy when, after graduating in 1975 with an agronomy major and business minor, Terry was hired as superintendent at the Peninsula State Park Golf Course - the one and only golf course at a Wisconsin State Park. He worked there from April of 1975 through the summer of 1976 and has fond memories of his short-term experience as a golf course superintendent.

“I was there during a droughty period, and the course had an antiquated irrigation system,” he recalls. “We had to bring a fire truck onto the course to water the greens early in the spring because the water hadn't been turned on yet. Once the water was on, we had to use a metal detector and pitch fork to find the quick coupler heads on the fairways.

“The summer of 1976 was very

droughty and there was some insect and grub damage going on, so the skunks and raccoons were coming in," Terry continues. "I laugh now, but can you picture, in today's politically correct world, having a park ranger driving a pickup truck down the fairway at night with me in the back shining a spotlight and blasting the skunks and coons with a shotgun?"

Terry also remembers UW Entomologist Chuck Koval driving his motor home up to Peninsula to establish experimental grub control plots on the golf course. "So there's always been a connection to the University," Terry says. "There have always been people who have helped me do well along the way."

Terry was not destined to be a golf course superintendent for long. But he didn't jump right into sales,

either. "When I was still in college I job shadowed Jerry O'Donnell for a day when he was a sales rep for Scotts," Terry recalls. "I was always intrigued with sales. So when a position came open, I applied for it." The sales job had already gone to another applicant, but Terry was hired by Bill Hoopes to become a Prof Turf Institute Instructor for Scotts. He accepted and began work in September of 1976.


"We would put together a technical manual each summer, and then in the winter go out and make presentations to golf course superintendents, landscapers and lawn care people," Terry explains. "That was an unbelievable experience because we worked in the research building at Scotts where the latest research was being conducted. And I learned so much because teaching is the best way


to learn. I enjoyed the travel. I just learned an unbelievable amount about myself, public speaking and agronomics. It was fantastic."

**Itching for more...**

But then Terry was hit with the 17-month itch again. "I was at Peninsula for 17 months and, as it turned out, I was with Scotts for 17 months," he explains. "I like to say I had the 17-month itch." He also had an itch to start a family and to own his own business.


"We bought a house in the summer of 1977 and figured it was about time to fill the bedrooms," Terry says, adding that Kathy soon became pregnant. "We had lived away from Madison for the better part of three years and wanted to get back to that area. In the summer of 1977 I moonlighted for Barefoot Grass Lawn Service in






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Columbus, Ohio, selling lawn care service. The company was starting to franchise. So when we came to Madison for Christmas, I looked into the feasibility of starting a franchise in the Madison market and decided it would play here."

When they returned to Ohio after Christmas they put their house on the market, Terry gave notice at Scotts that he was leaving the end of February, and they moved in with Terry's parents. "On March 1 (1978), we were in business with Barefoot Grass. We started the franchise from scratch with one truck."

Just one month later their first child was born. "I remember being in the labor room with Kathy. I've got one hand on the small of her back to help relieve her pain from back labor, and my other hand holds a telephone; I'm calling back accounts I've measured. Talk about

motivation! We now had one more mouth to feed, so I did what it took."

The first year in business they had 275 accounts and did \$44,000 worth of business. "Once we made Madison a cash cow we opened franchises in the Appleton/Green Bay area; Austin, Texas; Lexington, Kentucky; and Peoria, Illinois," Terry explains. "When we sold the business in 1997 we were up to 12,000 accounts and over \$3 million in business."

As a business owner, Terry has always tried to be a fair boss to his employees. "I like to tell people that I try to be a fair boss because I never had a bad boss. Everybody I ever worked for has been outstanding - the people at the UW Ag school, Randy Smith at Nakoma, Bill Hoopes at Scotts. They just always treated me extremely fair, so I've tried to do that with others."

### Lemons to lemonade...

During nearly 20 years as a Barefoot Grass franchisee, there's one episode that is foremost in Terry's mind - a disaster with a relatively happy ending. "In 1988, about 300 of our deluxe lawn customers in Wisconsin ended up with burn spots on their lawns - some just a few spots, and some lawns really got hammered. I couldn't figure out what was happening. It wasn't a typical burn, and seasoned applicators were doing the work.

"Dr. Gayle Worf, a retired UW plant pathologist, is the one who diagnosed it," Terry continues. "He looked at one of the lawns and said, 'Terry, if I didn't know better I'd think it was Atrazine damage on wheat.' So I checked the lot numbers with the fungicide vendor and, sure enough, during the bagging process some of the conveyor areas hadn't been cleaned properly



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and there was Atrazine in the fungicide.

"What a mess it was. It was just terrible," he related. "We had to put activated charcoal on all of the lawns to try to negate the Atrazine, and then we either reseeded or resodded them. But the vendor was great and stood by us. Of the 100 accounts affected in the Madison area, we only lost four of them. We got a note from a retired executive from Oscar Mayer and he said, 'The way you handled that should be taught in business school.' That really made us feel good."

A short time later they received the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Connecticut Mutual Blue Chip Enterprise Award for the state of Wisconsin - an award given to a business that successfully deals with a major challenge. "Life's

always full of challenges. It's best to turn a bad situation into a good one," Terry adds.

This is exactly what he did when business mergers presented him with another challenge in 1997. When Terry opened the Barefoot Grass franchise in Madison in 1978, TruGreen and Chemlawn were his major competitors. Then Service Master bought out TruGreen, which in turn bought out Chem-Lawn. And in 1997 TruGreen/Chemlawn bought out Barefoot Grass.

#### **Out of business, in business...**

"I had three choices," Terry recalls. "One, I could remain a franchisee and pay royalties to my competitor, which didn't seem right to me. Two, I could go independent. Three, I could sell out. After some negotiation, I got the classic offer I couldn't refuse. So

we sold out and I was retired at the age of 44. For six months it was great to have a recharge period after going through the sale. But then I knew I'd have to do something that would give me a sense of accomplishment each day. And as Kathy says, stealing a line from an aunt of mine, 'I married Terry for better or worse, but not for lunch.'"

Through his many contacts in the business, Terry checked out a few options. Some people at the Canadian-based Weed Man Lawn Care, a 35-year-old company that was just beginning to open U.S. markets, wanted him to recruit experienced turf managers to open Weed Man franchisees in the U.S. "I had a three-year non-compete clause with the sale of my business, but Weed Man let me work in areas where I didn't previously have markets," Terry explains. "Then when



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the clause was up in the spring of 2001, we opened up a Weed Man franchise in Madison.”

Terry is connected to the company in three ways. One, he’s Director of Development for Weed Man Lawn Care of the United States, helping them build a franchise network across the country. “We’ve gone from six to 76 locations in less than four years,” he points out. Terry helps find sub-franchisers who will recruit and set up franchises in their territory.

Two, he is one of 13 sub-franchisers for Weed Man in the U.S. “We’ve got North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the northern third of Illinois,” Terry explains. “We sell franchises within that area and help support them as well.” And three, he has ownership in some individual Weed Man franchises, including the one in Madison.

Recently Terry’s 23-year-old son, Andrew, joined the business. “He just graduated from UW-Madison with a soils major and business minor,” he points out. “He had interned with me for two summers while going to college. He’s been working from the sales end, selling lawn care. He’s certified and licensed.”

***Paying forward...***

Through all of his years in business, Terry has always taken time to give back to the industry and to his alma mater. Currently he’s on the Board of Visitors of the UW’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. He’s a member of the Mendota Gridiron Club, the football booster group in Madison. “I was president back in 1994 when we won the first Rose Bowl. That was an absolute dream come true. I’ve also been involved with the Badger basketball boosters and

other UW athletic causes.”

In the industry he’s involved with and past president of many organizations, including the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association, the Wisconsin Landscape Federation, the Grounds Management Association of Wisconsin and the Professional Lawn Care Association of America. “I enjoy working with others in organizations, people like Monroe Miller, Tom Harrison, Randy Jaspersen, Paul Huggett, and on and on - quality people with whom you enjoy accomplishing goals as a team. That stimulates me,” Terry points out.

Locally, he and Kathy gave a challenge grant of \$80,000 to keep a second gym from being cut in a Mt. Horeb High School building project. They did the same when their Catholic church needed some work.



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"The trifecta was paying back the university for the help it's given me over the years," Terry continues. "Kathy and I donated \$150,000; the WLF came to the table with \$100,000; and the UW Foundation matched with \$250,000. So we were able to endow \$500,000 for the 'Terry and Kathleen Kurth Wisconsin Distinguished Graduate Fellowship in Turfgrass Management.' This will fund somebody's master's degree while they do research in turf. But I'm a big believer in communications, so they must spend 60 to 70 percent of their time doing outreach. I'm very excited about and proud of this."

Terry is proud of his financial success and happy to share it with the greater community. "There's an old expression that I try to live by," he says. "You can't pay back; you can only pay forward. Am I proud of my material possessions? Yes. Does that help drive me? Yes. Will I be apologetic for that? No. Because you have to look at whatever drives the individual. No question, you want to move forward - whatever works as long as you're not kicking other people along the way. And if you do accumulate a treasure, hopefully you use that to help stimulate other people and give them opportunities. It's like at our church; they always talk about Time, Talents and Treasure - the three T's. People give what they can and hopefully are able to give all three."

#### **Family matters...**

Terry is also proud of his family. "They say behind every great man there's a great woman. Hopefully I'm a good man, but Kathy is definitely a great woman," he says. "She helped initially with the business, did the accounting when we first got started. She's not as active in the business now. Between planning weddings, dealing with our new grandson, running the household and working in her flower beds, that keeps her plenty busy."

The Kurths have four children. Amanda, the one being born while Terry made phone calls, is 26 years old. "She made me a grandfather this summer," Terry beams. "She is married to a fireman who also has a degree in computer science. She just started her fourth year of medical school here at Madison."

"Krista will be 25 in November," he continues. "She has a degree in Communications and Public Relations from UW-LaCrosse and just recently got hired as a sales rep for a Corpus Christi newspaper. She is engaged and living in Kingsville, Texas where her fiancé is a graduate assistant on a Division 2 football team; he wants to become a college football coach."

"Andy is our third child. We already talked about him," Terry adds. "Our bambino is Brandon who is a senior at Mt. Horeb High School. He works with the Weed Man franchise sometimes in the summer."

While the kids were growing up, Terry got tremendous enjoyment out of coaching their various athletic teams. He still loves to watch sports, fish, and play golf. "There's still a bit of the superintendent in me," he admits. "I still enjoy seeing a rainbow in the sprinkler in the early morning or the evening."

#### **Future plans...**

It was a golf trip in the Canadian Rockies that prompted the Kurths to purchase a townhouse on the 7th hole. "Four years ago we were at Silvertip, a beautiful golf course built into the side of a mountain. They call it the 'extreme mountain golf experience'," Terry explains, adding that the course is near Canmore, Alberta. "They were building townhouses on the course. Just on a whim we checked it out. I talked to my younger brother; he bought one-third and we bought two-thirds."

The Kurths also have a vacation home near Manitowish Waters in Wisconsin. "We've been going up there for 18 years and the family dearly loves it," Terry says.

If all goes as planned, Terry will have more time to golf and travel in a few years. "Our goal is to continue to grow our business. I'll always keep my hand in it, but I'm grooming my son to take it over on a day-to-day basis so I can semi-retire in a few years," he explains. "We want to spend our time at our two vacation homes, enjoy our grandchildren, and keep active with the university. I'm ready to slow down and smell the roses or turfgrass along the way." ♣

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