

Rocky Mountain moves

Denver's Tom and Becky Garber *touch* condo clients with landscape management techniques built around hard work and high tech.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

He's being eaten alive the hard way—from the inside out by the acid in his stomach. His nerves feel like somebody is dry shaving them with a rusty razor.

Meet the landscape contractor who makes his living dealing with condominium boards in the foothills of the Rockies.

"I left that meeting feeling miserable," says Tom Garber, recalling a memorable encounter with one board. "I was just shaking."

Meet Garber of the finely-trimmed Edwardian beard and the small-college linebacker build. Meet his partner, his wife of 15 years, Becky, a slender, stylish woman with a winning smile.

**'Becky, I just got
ran over by a
sod truck.'**

—Garber

He studied to be a college professor. She was a journalist.

Today they're owners of Denver-based Colorado Landscape Enterprises Inc. (C.L.E.). The five-year-old company employs 30, is approaching the million dollar club, and recently moved into a new 2,700-square-foot office. C.L.E. is tailored exclusively for town house and condo turf and landscape management.

Success for the Garbers doesn't come easy. It comes as a result of their



Tom and Becky Garber in front of Chimney Creek town house development in the foothills, one of the properties maintained by their Colorado Landscape Enterprises.

stubborn drive to learn from other industry leaders, the courage to test new ideas, and an almost fanatical desire to please.

It was this obstinacy (attention Guinness Book of World Records) that pushed Garber to sit through 15 homeowner association meetings in one month, sometimes two the same evening, sometimes on opposite sides of Denver.

C.L.E. has some other unique wrinkles.

"Becky, I just got run over by a sod truck," Garber remembers saying after dialing his wife from the wreckage of his car this summer after it had been flattened by a supplier's truck.

Car telephones

"Our entire operation is based on our communication system," Garber says. Clients and work crews are scattered over a 30-square-mile area.

"Silver Bullet" is Garber's car radio name, "Becky Base," his wife's. Then there's "The White Shadow" or "Red Rider" or "The Little Rascals," all C.L.E. employees. All are linked by a sophisticated cellular telephone network.

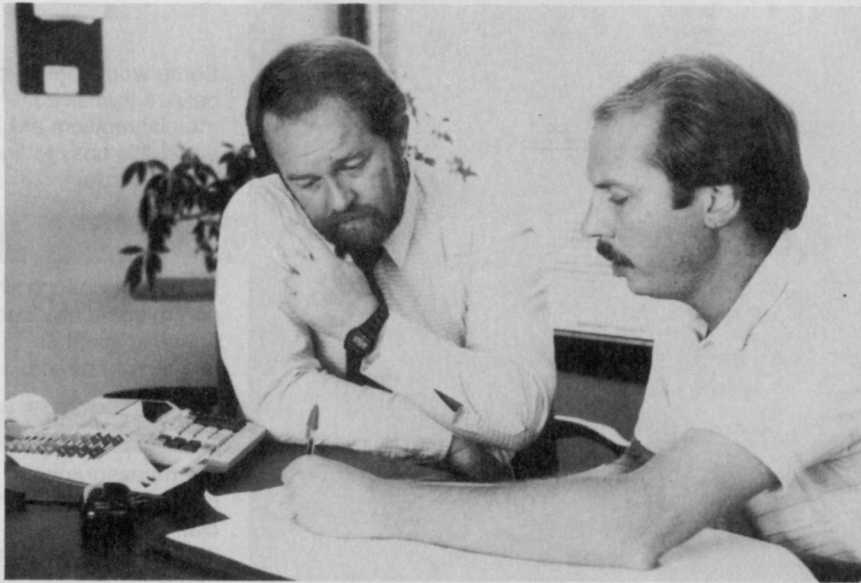
"High tech, high touch," Garber describes it. "Maybe our clients don't see us, but we'll be touching them every day."

And the Garbers want to touch their clients the right way. No long hair or earrings for the male members of C.L.E. landscape crews. "We hire the all-American

types," Garber says.

C.L.E. also touches its employees with a full-time client services manager. "We get 30 calls a day from our clients. If we didn't have the client services coordinator, these little jobs would end up on little scraps of paper."

Even so, Garber buzzes the perimeter of Denver daily, his car telephone



Tom Garber (left) reviews maintenance plans with property manager John Hammersmith.

at his hip. He's talking to clients, touching bases with property managers.

So why is Garber busting his buns?

Condo boards

"We basically start from scratch every year," he says. "Contracts are usually for 12 months."

Homeowner associations meet monthly to discuss common concerns, to determine who will collect their garbage, who will reroof their

'I can convince an association to get rid of any contractor'

—Hammersmith

units, who will maintain their grounds. Nine times out of ten they employ a property manager to hire the contractors, like C.L.E., they need.

It's a symbiotic (and sometimes mutually suspicious) triumvirate of interests. Change a few key members of the condo board, axe the landscape contractor. Switch property managers, boot the contractor.

Says Garber, "People in this business tell me that homeowner associations just don't make any sense. Even though you work your fanny off, they will drop you in a couple of years for whatever the reason."

John Hammersmith, vice president of a Denver-based property management company, fixes his icy blue eyes on the *bottom line*.

"I know I can convince an association to get rid of any contractor,"

he says. "Boards don't call me unless they have a problem. I've got to have the peace of mind that if I have a problem the contractor will take care of it. And the landscape contractor is the most important service we provide."

Hammersmith, fielding an average of 30 complaints daily, doesn't have time to mix sentiment with business.

It's no wonder that few landscape maintenance firms in Denver specialize in condos.

Says Garber, "while everybody else is running from condominium maintenance, we're running to it."

Garber listens

Garber took this stand after listening to an industry speaker at an Associate Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) convention in Dallas three years ago. "I learned you have to carve your own niche. You can't expect to go head-to-head with the established firms in their specialties," he recalls.

Garber, who had started his landscape maintenance firm two years earlier "to survive, to pay a few bills," was already on his way to parlaying a 22-inch push mower, string trimmer, and edger into a successful business. But first he had to take a keener business interest in irrigation.

The Denver area is semi-arid. Landscape irrigation accounts for 50 percent of water usage. A drought his second year in business wiped out a season of maintenance. Clients dried up as landscapes withered.

His trouble-shooting sprinkler crew visits most sites daily now.

Denver's climate also pushed C.L.E. into snow removal. In addition to providing a winter cash flow, snow

removal allows C.L.E. to keep good workers year round. Emphasis is on walks. The main tool is a plastic shovel. When worn out, it's thrown away. Steel is too heavy. At Denver's altitude it would wear out workers in the brittle air of long nights.

Shovelers work six-hour evening shifts so that walks are clear by the morning rush.

Landscape management, sprinkler repair, snow removal—says Garber: "Suddenly we found ourselves with a corporation."

But, he points out, "I wasn't a businessman."

With a B.A. in English literature from Cal State at Fresno and an M.A. in theology from Chicago's Trinity Divinity University, his only business experience came from a short stint in Denver real estate.

Becky, with a similar educational background (degrees in English literature, history, and information management), put her journalistic aspirations on a back burner.

They immerse themselves in industry affairs and seek the advice of successful businessmen. Tom is on the board of directors of the Maintenance Division of ALCA. Becky is active in state and local industry associations. And they read. Trade publications. Books like *Megatrends* and *In Search of Excellence*.

This husband-wife team approach is being extended with C.L.E. now di-

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vided into three divisions: Turf Care, Sprinkler Management, and Special Services. Teams are assigned territories. Jobs are divided into 1/4- and 1/2-day projects. Crews work four-day weeks, Tuesday through Friday. The C.L.E. team's goal is to have each residential property as attractive as possible for weekends.

So, what are the payoffs for the Garbers and C.L.E.?

The most noticeable rewards are maintenance contracts averaging \$25,000 each (up from about \$10,000 just two years ago) and several long-term agreements with homeowner associations, C.L.E.'s first.

Of course, Garber admits, satisfied clients members and smiling property managers make those long evening condo board meetings a darn sight more enjoyable.

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