

FLAT AND HARD

That's what the concrete is like after Lion Landscaping has installed it. Concrete work has proven to be a profitable addition to this Washington, D.C.-area business.

by Jerry Roche, editor



Concrete is poured with the use of a concrete pump tank (in background). Notice two concrete trucks pouring at the same time.

Mike Uzzo sees a future in concrete.

Uzzo, owner of Lion Landscaping of Mt. Airy, Md., thinks landscape contractors can take advantage of this unique business opportunity. He certainly has.

Uzzo contends that, if the contractor is capable of laying the concrete floor to new industrial/commercial buildings, he has a head start in bidding on the landscaping of the finished site.

"When we do the concrete, we have no trouble getting the landscaping," he says. "Landscaping is the last thing developers think of, but I'm on them early—very early."

The average concrete-laying job (Uzzo calls them "pours") lasts 2.75 days, according to his records. That means in excess of 100 jobs per year. And they are becoming more frequent. "In 1985, 51 percent of our business was landscaping; in 1986, 65 percent of the business was concrete laying," Uzzo points out.

"It's to the point that all I do now is oversee landscaping. But concrete, I'm totally involved in—70

percent of my time."

Some similarities

The different types of contracting jobs have similarities.

Both, for instance, deal with perishable products. Shrubs, to take an example, usually have to be on-site within a few hours of the actual installation. Concrete must be delivered

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within one hour of the pour.

Both are labor intensive, too. But more labor costs are involved in landscaping; more equipment costs (concrete, wire, etc.) in concrete jobs. It is apparently more difficult to bid concrete jobs, but the job itself is easier than installing a landscape.

Also, "you really don't want to screw up a concrete job," Uzzo contends. "Having it broken up and dumped after it's dried is real, real

expensive."

Uzzo has a strong background in concrete pouring, though his formal education is in horticulture.

He graduated from Penn State University, home of the Nittany Lion football team, in 1980. (Hence the business name, Lion Landscaping.) His advisor at Penn State was Thomas Watschke, Ph.D., who he often telephones with questions.

But...

"My father sells concrete, so I've been around it all my life," Uzzo says. "When I was in school, I did concrete work in the summer. All my on-the-job training has been in concrete."

"I learned how to read a blueprint on the job. And I knew deep down that doing the big floors is what I wanted to get back into."

Modest beginnings

The company was begun in 1980, from virtually nothing.

"I went door-to-door at night during the summers selling landscaping," Uzzo remembers. "One night, I got three small jobs—all from Penn State graduates. When I got out of school, the biggest thing was—bang!—taking the first step. I started working out of my LeMans coupe."

Uzzo's brother Peter is a partner.

"Our first good-sized job was a retaining wall we had to put up. Because we didn't have much equipment, we

tried to do it all by hand, but we ended up calling a buddy who had a backhoe."

From that humble beginning, the business quickly prospered. "I always wanted to have my own business," Mike says. "I took business courses in college, and I used to sit in on concrete courses. So I knew that all the money we made we had to put right back into the company. We bought very slowly." *continued on page 44*



Mike Uzzo, concrete merchant, on the way to another job.

Mike's wife Mari, a Penn State graduate with a degree in finance, is the company's bookkeeper.

"Peter is mechanically inclined," Mike observes. "I'm more customer-oriented. We complement each other. But at one point, the books were flat-out burying me. So we brought Mari into the picture. Take me and my

brother, plug her in there, and you're talking about everybody complementing in all directions."

Even Uzzo's father enters the big picture. "He's been very, very instrumental in drumming up business," Mike admits. "He's selling concrete and the people are always asking him if he knows any concrete contractors.

"Yeah, my sons," he tells them."

Most of the company's business is in Montgomery and Frederick counties (Maryland) and Washington, D.C. proper. Twelve employees handle jobs like the White House (where Lion installed topsoil and sod at a new gate) and the Square 37 Hyatt Regency in Georgetown (a \$79,000 job). When there's a lot of concrete-laying to be done, the payroll expands to 20.

"When we started out, we were 100 percent residential," Uzzo notes. "Now, we are 80 to 85 percent commercial/industrial. And most of the homeowner work is in the Potomac area in Maryland—big, nice jobs."

A nursery, too!

Besides the nursery holding 3,000 to 4,000 trees in Mt. Airy, Lion Landscaping also lists pick-up trucks, a backhoe, an International 1900 DT, two trailers, two four-wheel-drive Kubotas, a Ford F-100 and a tree spade as assets.

Yes, the company installs massive concrete floors. But it also does driveways, sidewalks and patios. The company retains its original landscape design/build business and also hydroseeds with a Finn 1500-gallon hydroseeder. But growth remains slow—by design.

"It didn't take me long to figure out that the more employees, the more headaches," Uzzo says. "I'm as big as I want to get. I don't need any more headaches."

'It didn't take me long to figure out that the more employees, the more headaches.'

—Mike Uzzo
Lion Landscaping

"I also don't have the overhead of the big guys. Man, you get that big and it's like a big Pac-Man game: you've got to keep feeding!"

Thus, Lion Landscaping doesn't go after the "big" jobs. "Working with the big guys downtown was such a headache. They push you so they can get done quickly. Ruppert, Chapel Valley—companies like that go after the big jobs. That's the kind of job they're geared for. I'm not geared for them."

Mike Uzzo, however, remains content with that philosophy.

"We hop back and forth: concrete, landscaping, hydroseeding. Hey, I'm happy." **LM**

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