

Top Care gets 'higher' education

The grounds at Washington University of St. Louis challenge one of the city's leading landscape contractors.

by Ron Hall
Senior Editor

■ University grounds stretch a landscape contractor in ways that a corporate park or residential development never can.

Steve Erbe discovered this when his Top Care landscape company began caring for the 169 acres (including athletic fields) at prestigious Washington University in St. Louis.

Perhaps even Erbe didn't realize how much the university would challenge Top Care; not that he didn't get a tipoff in the infancy of his first three-year contract.

In late summer 1992, the university—and consequently Top Care—got just one week's notice to prepare the campus for nationally televised presidential debates. This included satisfying all the security requirements that the presence of a U.S. President and two challengers demanded.

You're kidding—"When Top Care started, they said something like, 'You've got to be kidding,' and we said, 'No, we're not kidding,'" recalls Ralph H. Thaman, Jr., director of the Department of Facilities Planning and Management at Washington U.

"We brought a whole new set of rules and uniqueness to Top Care as a contractor, and I'm sure it was a learning experience."

Admits Erbe: "A campus can require a tremendous amount of muscle instantly."

But flexibility is one of Top Care's strong suits; as one of the largest landscape/lawn care companies in St. Louis, it can deliver a lot of manpower and equipment to a job site in a hurry.

Thaman, who had come there after 30 years in private industry, saw that the grounds at the university could not remain status quo. He was also impressed with Erbe's creativity.

"He (Erbe, Top Care's president) doesn't look at a problem and say, 'I don't know how to do that.' He looks at it and asks, 'What's the best way to do it?'"

A matter of priorities—Thaman's mission was simple—raise the quality and the appearance of the university campus.



Paul Norman, horticulturist at Washington University, sees a big improvement with grounds since Top Care took over.

But it had to be done with a budget.

"Our business is teaching and research, not grounds maintenance," he says. "But our campus is an important marketing tool, and it has to be done very well and have some pizzazz."

Challenges included developing specifications for each grounds category, and finding and partnering with an experienced private contractor.

Washington University in St. Louis, like all colleges and universities, competes for a limited number of quality students.

"When a high school student visits our campus, the attractiveness of our grounds becomes a marketing issue," says Bill Wiley, manager of maintenance operations. "The

students get to see almost every inch of the campus."

In fact, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching reported about 10 years ago that 62 percent of high school seniors stated that the appearance of the grounds and buildings influenced them "the most" during their visit to college campuses.

"But the bottom line is that there is a bottom line," added Wiley. "We have to keep expenses at the lowest practical level and still provide the necessary services."

A contracted service—In fact, budget cuts in the 1980s caused the university to disband its in-house grounds department. To fill the void, the university struck a deal with its contracted custodial firm to supply an 18-person grounds crew.

That didn't work well, remembers Paul M. Norman, university services supervisor for grounds care and the paint shop. "It was inefficient. We were just not getting the

productivity out of these people."

For one thing, the size of the grounds crew rarely matched the tasks it was required to do.

"Sometimes we had to find work for them to do, especially in the winter when their main responsibility was snow removal," says Norman. Once, for instance, the grounds crew spent a day moving furniture. "They weren't furniture movers. They didn't like doing it."

Also, the university's grounds and equipment maintenance had become very costly.

"The workers were operating our equipment, and we were maintaining our equipment," says Norman.

Welcome change—When the custodial company approached the university about revising the grounds program, Thaman saw an opportunity to get expert help.

One of his first tasks was to develop specifications for each grounds category.

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But the bigger challenge was finding and partnering with an experienced private grounds contractor.

Enter Top Care, whose headquarters are just several miles away. It had already shown it could shine with an atypical account by its on-going maintenance at the beautiful Missouri Botanical Garden, also in St. Louis.

But could it:

- shine on a campus where student security and sports field safety were as important as aesthetics?
- provide service for the university's incredible range of events?
- coordinate its efforts with several different departments within the university?

Communication, admits Top Care's Erbe, is almost as great a challenge as the grounds themselves.

"Sometimes when we get into a project, there are three, four or maybe five people we need to be coordinated with," he says. As frustrating as it sometimes is, this



Ralph H. Thaman, Jr., says grounds are important, but not at the expense of education or research.

is, to some degree, by design.

"We've tried to make our grounds maintenance a collective effort of a lot of

people who have a reason to be concerned about grounds," says Thaman. "That's from a teaching, from a security and from a marketing standpoint."

Relationship building—Both men, however, agree on one point—the relationship between a university and a private grounds contractor needs time.

"It takes a couple of years to build a relationship," says Erbe. "The first year you're just bouncing around trying to take notes and get the work done. The second year you're planning ahead a little bit better. The third year you're doing a lot of things right."

In fact, says Erbe, grounds maintenance costs to the university stabilized as his supervisors and crews became increasingly more efficient there.

The campus account has given his on-site supervisors a great opportunity to grow as grounds managers, while it's also allowed Washington University to focus on its goals—teaching and research.

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must effectively integrate four different divisions, every employee must be taught "to look beyond the things they're delivering." And that's a challenge that requires training, training and more training.

"The turnover rate here is relatively low (less than 12 percent), except in the Maintenance Division, so our training is starting to take hold," Warehime notes. "We have 40 to 50 employees year round. In the winter, they're on half-time and unemployment, and that's when we give them a 40-hour training course."

Senske's business focus is on upscale residential. Its Application Division is 70 percent residential and Maintenance is 40 percent residential.

The Construction Division is mostly upscale residential.

High-profile accounts include Hewlett Packard and Kaiser Aluminum. But the company dabbles in other areas like grainery fumigations that require technicians to wear full scuba gear.

Such diverse jobs have earned Senske Lawn & Tree Care its well-deserved reputation of the local symphony orchestra—and it's as capable of playing Woodstock as the Hollywood Bowl.

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A Because these business...

Q What is Integrated Grounds Maintenance?

A The Professional Care of Your Property.

Q Why Contract Grounds Maintenance?

A #1... Curb Appeal

#2... Investment Protection

Q Why Senske Integrated Grounds Maintenance? Value Added Service at a Competitive Price!