

LM's 1998:

People of the Year

Although they come from very different backgrounds, each of our 1998 People of the Year share a common character-

istic: a focus on improving the industry around them through dedication and extra effort.

By the LM STAFF

Lawn Care Category

**Lou Wierichs Jr.,
owner/president of Pro-X Systems Inc.,
Appleton, WI.**



People who have worked with Lou Wierichs Jr. at various organizations agree on several things: he's generous with his time, finances and efforts; he's dedicated to achieving the organization's goals; and he believes these efforts should be enjoyable.

Wierichs joined the lawn care industry in 1988. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Stout with a B.S. in Hotel and Restaurant Management, Wierichs worked in several industries, including banking and printing. His eight years driving a semi-trailer gave him a sense of being on his own. "That was the closest thing to owning a business, without the headaches," he recalls.

In 1987, Wierichs became partners with two others in a Servicemaster lawn care franchise, which won the company's "Fast Start" award for quick growth in 1988. By 1990, the business had grown to include a second franchise in the Green Bay area.

After the Servicemaster purchase of Tru-Green and Chemlawn in 1991, Wierichs and partners established their own lawn care company — Pro-X Systems Inc. It offers lawn care, mowing and some landscape and tree care, as well as aeration and other additions. In 1995, Wierichs bought his partners

out and this fall, added a Christmas Decor franchise.

Jumping right in

Even when his company was new, Wierichs sought out others in the industry. At a trip to PLCAA's annual conference in Las Vegas, he attended a presentation by Bob Andrews, The Greenskeeper, Carmel, IN, on the benefits of belonging to local associations. This made a major impression on him. "I came back and made some calls to the state Department of Ag" about an finding or forming an association.

With other local green industry people, Wierichs helped get the Grounds Management Association of Wisconsin on its feet. "This really got me involved at the state level," he notes. Wierichs became active in the leadership of GMAW, as well as the Wisconsin Landscape Federation, a group coordinating the efforts of different green industry professions. Currently, Wierichs is WLF president.

He saw how critical organized efforts were to the industry. "In our industry, it seemed like there was always a fire pop-

ping up and we were always throwing water on it. I thought we should be united to battle those fires and also to take a more proactive stance in our communities."

Wierichs also became involved at the national level, joining the board of directors of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America in 1992, serving as its president in 1994 and stepping in to fill an empty directors' spot, in a term that expires this month. In fact, he proudly notes he joined PLCAA before he had ever treated a lawn.

Two other accomplishments

Wierichs views with pride are his service on the Green Industry Expo board (serving as president in 1996), and his work as president of the PLCAA Foundation, now called the Evergreen Foundation (currently, he is vice president).

Making it enjoyable

Terry Kurth, president of Lawn Care of Wisconsin Inc. and Badgerland Irrigation, Middleton, WI, has crossed paths often

Lou Wierichs Jr. career highlights

1987: Becomes partner in a Servicemaster lawn care franchise in Appleton, Wis.

1989: Grounds Management Association of Wisconsin representative to the Wisconsin Landscape Federation — a post held continuously since then.

1991: Establishes Pro-X Systems Inc.

1991-95: Director of the Professional

Grounds Care Category

George M. Gaumer,

national sales and operations manager, Commercial Services, The Davey Tree Expert Co., Kent, Ohio



Some of George Gaumer's earliest memories involve the green industry — he remembers playing in the yard of his father's landscape business in Warren, Ohio. In fact, the family lived on site. This early involvement extended during family vacations, when the Gaumers took time to attend annual conferences of the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

with Wierichs. He says Wierichs is "a consensus builder. He's looking for the things that benefit everyone in an organization."

According to Kurth, Wierichs tries to pay back an industry that has been good to him by "paying forward." And he does it in true Wierichs style, Kurth says: "Lou looks out for the best interests of the industry, but makes sure to build relationships and friendships along the way. He thoroughly enjoys people and wants to spread the fun through an organization that is getting things done." □

The business and management side of the green industry always fascinated Gaumer. "I noticed that a lot of people get into the field because they love horticulture and are good at working with plants, but some people are just not good with business. That's the side that always intrigued me," he notes.

After graduating with a B.S. in Business Administration (Marketing) from The Ohio State University, he joined a residential tree care firm in Columbus, Ohio. One of his first steps on the job was to become a member of ISA, where he held various positions, including Director of the Ohio chapter. He also became an ISA-certified arborist.

In supportive company

Gaumer joined The Davey Tree Expert Co. in 1977. With Davey's support, he continued his involvement with ISA and became a charter member of the Northeast Ohio Professional Grounds Management Society branch when it was started in the early 1980s. The experience of helping to develop the PGMS branch eventually led to activities at the national level, and by 1992, he became a PGMS director at large for a three-year term.

Coincidentally, changes in the industry and in Davey's business direction made this connection more valuable for Gaumer. "I started out going to some of the national meetings as a way to get business from in-house grounds managers," he notes. "But along the way, I got involved more with the organization at the same time Davey

diversified into grounds maintenance work. Soon the meetings became educational opportunities (for us)."

Finding consensus

Jeff Bourne, director of operations and education with Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), experienced Gaumer's team-building approach: "The phrase 'consummate professional' comes to mind because although he approaches things in a very businesslike fashion, it's well balanced with the human side, which creates an atmosphere of comfort that is productive."

David Luse, director of corporate development at LandCare USA, Houston, and founder of Arteka Corp., agrees: "George's leadership style is calm consensus building. He's a true leader and showed it by helping to pull the GIE partnership together." □

George M. Gaumer career highlights

1975: Joins Ohio Tree Surgery Co., Columbus, Ohio

1977: Joins ISA and becomes involved with industry organizations. Is appointed to Board of Governors and committee chair positions.

1977: Joins The Davey Tree Expert Co. as assistant advertising manager

1986: Becomes charter member of the Northeast Ohio Chapter, Professional Grounds Management Society.

1992-94: Board of Directors, Green Industry Expo

1994: President of Green Industry Expo

1996-98: PGMS Director at Large

1996-98: Board of Directors, Green Industry Expo

Lawn Care Association of America.

1991-96: Board of Directors, Green Industry Expo

1994: President of PLCAA

1995-97: President of PLCAA Foundation

1996: President of Green Industry Expo

1997-98: Director of PLCAA

1997-99: President of Wisconsin Landscape Federation

1998: Vice President of Evergreen Foundation

Golf Industry Category

Ron Dodson,

president of Audubon International, Selkirk, NY

The president of Audubon International may not seem an obvious candidate for a Person of the Year award in the Golf Industry category and yet Ron Dodson's impact, and the impact of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, the Signature Cooperative Sanctuary program and the Gold Signature Cooperative Sanctuary program, is having an effect on the golf industry.

The start

Ron Dodson started his career as a biology teacher in the midwest and in 1970 found himself in Henderson, KY, where the John James Audubon museum is located. From his initial contact, this self-described "fence-climbing radical" never looked back.

The idea of a "Community Conservation Network" began to develop around 1985 as a plan to have entire communities committed to conservation ideals. In 1988, with Dodson promoting the idea at conferences and to community leaders, he found that the interest level was extremely low. Dodson didn't give up on his idea, but decided, "Okay then let's go door to door. If we get enough citizens involved, maybe we'll end up with a community."

Golf gets involved

When this approach seemed to be working, Dodson turned his sights to businesses. Dodson did not have golf courses in his immediate plans, although as a golfer in college he realized that golf courses had a lot of potential. But it wasn't until a call from a course in upstate New York that things started moving. But from that modest beginning, there are now 2,000 golf courses in the Cooperative Sanctuary program.

The strategy

Dodson won't claim to having a business plan or a system for success. His philosophy is simple: "We're going to work with anyone, anywhere and everywhere and not discriminate who we work with... and we'll just take one door at a time, one step at a time."

There is no doubt that this approach has been successful in large part to his attitude and his gift for communication. Bob Swift, development manager of the Indian River Club, Vero Beach, FL, says that when he first read an interview with Dodson he was impressed, "I felt he was someone I wanted to meet and talk to."

Indian River became the third golf course to become a Signature Cooperative Sanctuary. Swift says that the entire experience has been rewarding both personally and professionally. Dodson's approach,



says Swift "has been to move the dialogue to a cooperative rather than antagonistic approach."

Prior to his work with golf course superintendents, Dodson acknowledges that he didn't really have a grasp on the responsibilities and range of knowledge required—"water quality protection, wildlife management, agronomics, horticulture"—as well as taking the time to "talk to golfers, work in the community, be involved in schools and be committed to outdoor management which includes a whole lot more than just how fast a green is."

Dodson finds great satisfaction in seeing his idea expand and grow, but has taken his knocks too. Early on, some environmental groups attacked the idea of working with golf courses. It was a shock for Dodson, who sees himself as an avid environmentalist. "I still go home sometimes and think, have I really gone over the edge here? I don't think I have, but some people think that I have sold my soul to the devil."

But Dodson is philosophical and believes that "when you cut through it, what is really most important is to care about people." □

Ron Dodson career highlights

- 1970:** Initial involvement with the National Audubon Society
- 1978-1982:** Executive Director of the Western Kentucky Environmental Planning Agency
- 1982-1987:** Regional Vice President of National Audubon Society
- 1985:** Awarded National Environmentalist of the Year
- 1985:** Idea for community-based conservation program takes shape
- 1987:** President of Audubon International
- 1988:** Pitches program to community leaders
- 1991:** First golf course registers in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program
- 1992:** First golf course project registers in the Audubon Signature Cooperative Sanctuary Program
- 1993:** Awarded the GCSAA President's Award for Environmental Leadership
- 1997:** First golf course project registers in the Audubon Gold Signature Cooperative Sanctuary Program
- 1997 to present:** Co-chairman of the USGA Wildlife Links Research Committee

Landscape Category

J. Landon Reeve, IV,

owner/president Chapel Valley Landscape Co., Woodbine, MD.

Landon Reeve and a buddy made themselves a small stack of fliers and passed them out in their Maryland neighborhood. The postcards proclaimed that the two were for hire. The asking wage: \$1 an hour—the going rate for school-boy help in 1955.

"I got a call from a local wholesale perennial grower," recalls J. Landon Reeve, IV, whose father was a mail carrier. That call was the start of a successful career in the green industry, a career that's earned him Landscape Management's Landscape 1998 Person of the Year.

From bottom up

For five years, Reeve worked summers and weekends for Bluemount Nursery, a perennial grower and wholesaler in Maryland. "That's basically how I got interested in horticulture," he recalls. In 1963 he earned a B.S. in Ornamental Horticulture from the University of Maryland.

While his interest and knowledge in horticulture grew, he was also determined to, someday, run his own show.

He had a dream

"I knew in high school that I wanted to have my own business," he says. "It was in my head. I can't pin-point why I felt that way except for maybe that part-time work at the nursery."

Reeve's first job with a local landscape company lasted about a year, before he and the company's garden center manager broke away and started their own garden center/landscape operation.

"It was just a little business, but it was a great experience," he says. The two men ran that business for four years before Reeve decided he wanted to go on his own.

"I couldn't see working seven days a week indefinitely. I wanted to have a family and I wanted to have a life," he says. "While I enjoyed it, I was at the garden center all weekend, and all week I was doing landscaping."

Founds Chapel Valley

In 1968, Reeve started Chapel Valley Landscape. He was its sole employee. While he's still the president and sole owner of the business, the landscape company now has 250 employees. It offers a full range of exterior landscape services, mostly in Maryland and northern Virginia.

"I don't know how we got this size," he says. "We really didn't have a plan to get big. Our plan was do quality work and take care of our customers and our employees. Our company just kept growing."

This insistence on providing quality work and excellent service has characterized Chapel Valley from its inception. This excellence is a reflection of the company's founder and president, colleagues tell LM.



"I've probably known him as long as I've known anybody in ALCA (Associated Landscape Contractors of America)," says Rod Bailey, Evergreen Services Corp., Bellevue, WA. "He's been a mentor to me as well as being a good friend."

"Landon is a sharing and caring person, and that certainly applies to his strong sense of professionalism in the industry."

Adds Ron Kujawa, Kujawa Enterprises, Inc., Cudahy, WI: "Landon is a gentleman in every sense of the word. There is dignity and class about him."

A past ALCA president, Reeve has shared what he's learned about the industry through his long-time participation in ALCA, the American Association of Nurserymen, and in a host of state and regional industry organizations.

Landon Reeve is still much involved in the day-to-day operation of Chapel Valley, but he's begun the transition process to the next generation, including a daughter and a son in the business. **LM**

J. Landon Reeve, IV, career highlights

- 1955:** Lands first green industry job, a summer job with a perennial grower/wholesale company
- 1963:** Graduates from University of Maryland with a B.S. in Ornamental Horticulture
- 1964:** He and a partner found a small garden center/landscape business
- 1968:** Establishes Chapel Valley Landscape Co.
- 1977-79:** President of Landscape Contractors Association MD-DC-VA
- 1980-81:** President of Maryland Nurserymen's Association
- 1984:** President of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America
- 1992-94:** ALCA Certification Board of Governors
- 1994:** American Association of Nurserymen Long-Range Planning Committee