



# Partnering builds

## Las Vegas projects

*Need to fund landscape projects? This UNLV grounds manager found his funding through creative partnerships on and off-campus*

By DON DALE

**T**he University of Nevada at Las Vegas is a beautiful campus in a rich, booming city. But because of landscaping budget restraints, it has had to find innovative means of funding new landscape projects. Partnering with other departments on campus, as well as businesses and individuals off campus, has provided that means, and Dennis Swartzell has used it to its fullest.

Swartzell is the director of landscape, grounds and arboretum at UNLV, a 330-

acre campus with 21,000 students. He says the partnering program came about because of necessity and has evolved into a way of life.

"We've gotten some things done that we wouldn't have been able to do financially," Swartzell says. He explains that UNLV is a young school — only 40 years old — and puts most of its money into capital programs such as a new law school.

### **It started with xeric**

The partnering program started almost inadvertently when there was a movement



◀ The UNLV xeric garden, which was the university's first big partnering project.

on campus to start a xeric garden, where desert plants could be displayed. It was a tough sell financially for the university administration. "They agreed, on the stipulation that it wouldn't cost the university any money," he recalls.

Swartzell, who has worked at the university for 16 years after coming from Georgia, says a local architect, Jack Zunino, donated his design services. The on-campus Museum of Natural History agreed to pay university landscape workers to do the labor.

"We went to many businesses and asked for assistance," Swartzell says. It paid off. Nurseries donated plants, for example, and a landscape supply company donated boulders. UNLV paid for lighting and the attractive paving in the garden, 15,000 sq. ft. of which was laid down by inmates from a local prison.

"I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I had over this," Swartzell says, recalling the logistical nightmare of coordinating so many individual efforts. The project was worrisome because it had so many new and unpredictable elements. But it turned out to be successful, and a camaraderie among the volunteers was established that would last for years.

"We planted 700 shrubs in one day with volunteers," he says. Now the university not only had a beautiful 1.5-acre xeric garden, it also had a base of donors and volunteers to call on for future projects.

Later, a project within a project developed when another donor paid for a bird viewing area — \$7,000 worth — as a family memorial. It included vegetation, a masonry wall and a water feature.

#### **Piece-by-piece campus redesign**

Swartzell says partnering actually be-

came a formal program in 1990 when the university's new Landscape Architecture Department came into being. The faculty asked the administration for permission to redesign the entire campus landscaping, with the focus on reducing turf for conservation purposes.



**Dennis Swartzell,**  
UNLV's director of  
landscape, grounds  
and arboretum

That initiative resulted in a master plan calling for the elimination of 18 acres of turf (of 80 acres of landscaping on campus, 59 were turf). But what was to become the "Turf Reduction Program" was estimated to cost \$3.2 million, which the university simply did not have. "We went into our next mode of partnering," Swartzell says.

A UNLV student group called Students Conscious of Protecting the Environment (SCOPE) was interested in the conservation of water and

formed the Stomp the Grass program, working with the university to reduce turf on campus. Students in SCOPE raised money, located business partners and donated their own labor to help Swartzell's Facilities Department enact the master plan. They produced a video to be used in promoting volunteerism and located an architect willing to draw up the landscape plans for free. Since then, turf reduction has proceeded by "little pieces" until the 18-acre goal has nearly been met.

"We're completing our last unit that's on paper," Swartzell notes, and SCOPE is still working with them, though not as active as it once was because of student graduations.

#### **Community partnerships**

But even within that partnership, other partnerships have developed. Five years ago, for example, Clark County approached the university about widening Tropicana Avenue on one border of the campus. Swartzell's group convinced the

county to pay \$120,000 to relandscape the roadside in exchange for permission to widen the street.

As a result, two acres of turf came out and were converted to water-conserving plants. That came at little cost to the university and helped further its long-term landscape goals.

Another project, a reduction in the two acres of turf around the Bigelow Health Sciences Building, was completed in a partnership with the Aid For AIDS Nevada chapter. The group wanted to create an AIDS memorial on campus, and Swartzell and his associates came up with the idea of combining goals.

"It was a little too aggressive for us to do," he says of converting the Bigelow acreage to xeric landscaping. But the AIDS group donated \$9,000, mostly for plants and rocks, and a memorial was set up that had the end effect of relandscaping the area.

"We did a lot of the work with volunteers and in-house resources," Swartzell explains.

#### **Master gardeners get involved**

One of the most productive partnerships has been with the Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Las Vegas. That organization was looking for a place where master gardeners could get certification and experience, and it just so happened that the university was looking for volunteer landscaping assistance.

"We jumped on this one, big-time," Swartzell says.

The partnership started as a training program. Swartzell provided the master gardeners 20 hours annually. But the gardeners kept coming back and have established a twice-monthly workday when they come on campus to work on a landscape project with him. It is often in the form of providing expertise in exacting skills such as tree pruning or planting.

"We've had three annual plant sales, and they do all the labor," Swartzell adds.



# UNLV's Partnerships at a Glance

- ▶ 330-acre campus
- ▶ 21,000 students
- ▶ Xeric garden partnership: local architect, on-campus Museum of Natural History, local businesses & nurseries, local prison, UNLV
- ▶ Campus redesign: Students (SCOPE), landscape architecture department, local businesses, UNLV
- ▶ Smaller projects: Clark County, Aid for AIDS (Nevada chapter), UNLV, volunteers,
- ▶ Master gardeners projects: Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, UNLV, Clark County Conservation District
- ▶ Alumni projects: UNLV Alumni Association, UNLV Facilities Department, local nurseries.



The campus is designated as an arboretum, and the master gardeners conduct the sales, as well as tours, to promote it. "We have some master gardeners with thousands of hours on campus," Swartzell adds.

## Campus tree inventory

Obviously, that is like adding more staff to the Facilities Department. A recent spin-off partnership evolved from the master gardeners — a tree inventory of the campus.

That project came from the Clark County Conservation District, which was assisting the county health department do a tree inventory of Las Vegas. The university was selected as the prototype site for the survey, which will eventually encompass the whole city. But for now, the county is giving UNLV a free inventory.

"We pulled the master gardeners in to do the tree identification," Swartzell points out. "It was a win/win/win situation."

## Getting alums enlisted

The latest partnership project was with

the UNLV Alumni Association, which wanted to provide gifts to the campus. Swartzell, a floriculture graduate of the University of Georgia, says that the UNLV Alumni Amphitheater, an open-air theater, was a direct result of that initiative.

The alumni gave \$100,000 for construction of the amphitheater, which consists of turf seating on a terraced swell. It provides a nice outdoor space for students to speak or simply study in the sun.

"The alumni worked with local contractors — also some alumni worked at reduced cost," Swartzell says. In addition to the amphitheater, the alumni donated 40 trees to commemorate the university's 40th anniversary.

Those trees were used in two themes: half went to line the Alumni Walk and half to the Alumni Grove. One area is oak trees; the other has mixed species. With the trees came three information kiosks, all free to the university.

Something that also benefits the univer-

▲ The UNLV Alumni Association partnership with the university resulted in this Alumni Grove and other projects that cost the university very little.

sity, Swartzell says, is the Facilities Department's enthusiasm to evaluate plants on campus to determine their appropriateness for the Las Vegas climate and soil. He considers this a form of partnership, since the nurseries that avail themselves of the service gain knowledge and sales contacts, while UNLV gets free trees and discounts on future sales and service.

As a result of all this partnering, UNLV and the arboretum have been able to enhance their motto: The Emerald in the Desert. **LM**

—The author is a freelance writer based in Hollywood, CA