

WINNER: GROUNDS MANAGEMENT

Kevin O'Donnell

**Superintendent of Grounds,
Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA**

BY RON HALL

Thirty-nine down and eleven to go. That's how Kevin O'Donnell describes climbing, one of his favorite hobbies. He's a member of the Highpointers, a national club of 1,800 people whose goal is to climb the highest points in each of the 50 states. So far, he's made it to the top of 39 of them — from Florida's Britton Hill at 346 ft. to California's Mt. Whitney which rises over 14,000 ft.

Challenges? They come in all sizes for O'Donnell, Superintendent of Grounds for Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA. But we didn't select him to be our "Person of the Year" in grounds management because of his mountaineering. We're honoring him because of the incredible range of services he offers to a great university. We also felt his willingness to advance the profession of groundskeeping at both the regional and national levels should be recognized.

Life at Villanova

At Villanova, his professional responsibilities include not only maintaining the grounds at the 220-acre campus but also managing the university motor pool, overseeing road maintenance, trash collection/recycling and, within the past several years, roof maintenance.

"The diversity presents some unique challenges," O'Donnell admits.

"Kevin keeps a clear focus even when our environment gets chaotic," adds Chuck Leeds, one of several supervisors who work with Kevin at the university. "We share some responsibilities and we have a very close working relationship. Actually, we have to — three of us share a 20 by 30 ft. office."

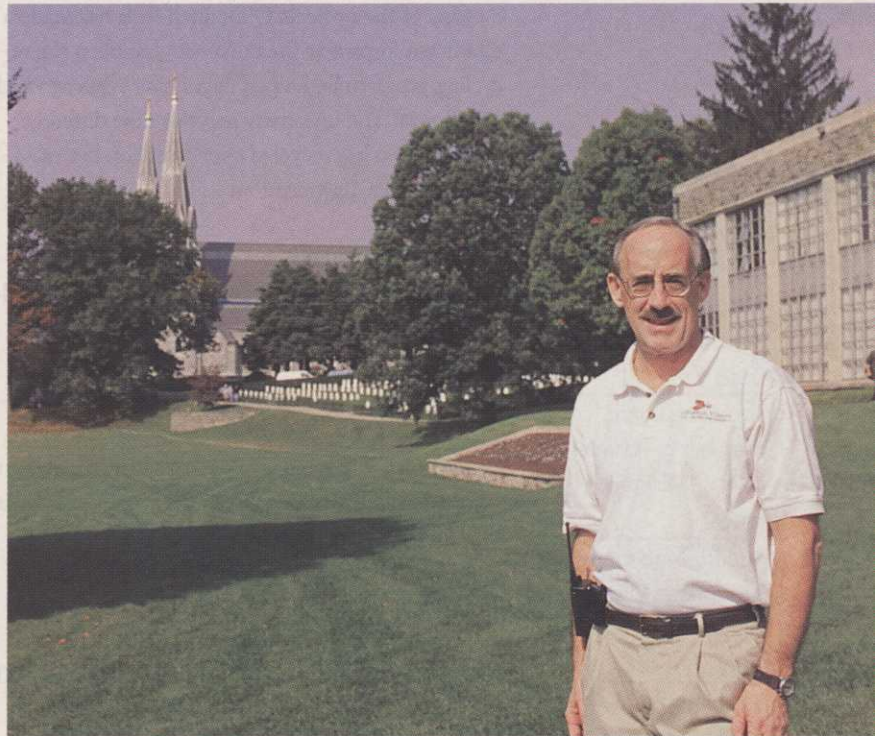
O'Donnell has been involved with many initiatives at Villanova, say university officials. One of them was serving on the Villanova Quality Improvement (VQI) council.

"The council originally had over 30 people on it from all walks of life and from all positions at the university," explains John Kelley, Ph.D., VQI Director. "We had a marvelous mix of faculty, administrators and staff of all kinds." Kelley said that O'Donnell embraced the positive suggestions arising from the VQI council and started self-directed work teams.

"The teams really got fired up and they took the initiative for many fascinating landscape projects," says Kelley.

"More recently, Kevin was a founding member of our environmental team of about 15 fa-

continued on page 28



Kevin O'Donnell on Villanova's arboretum campus.

2000
POY
AWARD

Career highlights

1977

Park Superintendent at Lower Salford Twp., PA

1983

Founding board member of Philadelphia PGMS Branch

1990

Superintendent of grounds at Villanova University

1991

Establishes recycling program at Villanova

1993

Establishes arboretum on Villanova campus

2000

Serves as president of PGMS

2000

Serves as president of GIE board



continued from page 27

cility administrators and staff. The team is looking at all phases of the environment here at Villanova," explains Kelley. "Not just grounds, but it's examining areas such as energy audits, resource conservation and emissions."

One of the projects O'Donnell feels has made a significant impact at the university has been the recycling program he helped begin nine years ago and still directs. The university recycles nine different products and has recycled over 5 million lbs. of products since its inception.

Working his way up

O'Donnell has taken a circuitous career path to Villanova, starting with his grade school days on Long Island, NY, and continuing as an undergraduate studying forestry at Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR.

"My plan was to go into parks management. I envisioned myself working out in the woods, maybe in a natural area," he explains.

In fact, after one year with a private landscape firm, that's what he did. His grounds career began as parks supervisor at Lower Salford Twp., a Philadelphia area community with about 500 acres of primarily rural parkland dotted with historical homes.

After three years at that position, he took a similar post at nearby Upper Dublin Twp. The new job brought more responsibility, including maintaining ball fields, picnics areas and walking/jogging trails. He was the supervisor for the parks maintenance program for 10 years before being selected for the Villanova University position just over 10 years ago.

Dedication to grounds professionals

It was during these years at the community parks that O'Donnell became involved with the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS), starting as a founding board member of its

Philadelphia branch. He served several years as president of this branch and eventually was named to the board of the national PGMS. His route to its presidency started six years ago when he served as Northeast Director of the national PGMS.

During his term as president this past year, O'Donnell set himself several goals including:

- ▶ offering greater opportunities for individual professional growth to all grounds personnel,
- ▶ spreading the word about the PGMS,
- ▶ developing a stronger relationship with PGMS branches, and
- ▶ strengthening the relationship with strategic partners such as the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers (APPA) and the American Public Works Association (APWA).

"He's done a fantastic job of holding us together and bringing our branches and many of our members closer together," says George Van Haasteren, Jr./CGM, in describing the job O'Donnell has done this past year as PGMS president.

"I'm definitely fortunate in having Kevin ahead of me because he's making my job so much easier when I become the president," adds Van Haasteren, the PGMS president for 2001.

It's been O'Donnell's efforts as a grounds professional at Villanova, however, that excite us most about honoring him.

"I have worked with Kevin in a number of capacities for approximately the last 10 years. I have always found him to be very committed to the mission of Villanova," says Helen Lafferty, Ph.D., University Vice President. "He is generous with his time and he does whatever is necessary to enhance the beauty of our university."

"It's always a pleasure to work on projects with Kevin because he approaches them in a can-do manner. One of his greatest accomplishments in my opinion was the naming of the Villanova campus as an arboretum.

"We are not only a better place because of his presence, we are a more beautiful place," Dr. Lafferty concludes.