

PROGRESS

Moving forward

A look at how the industry's national organizations have evolved since their early days

The Green Industry has changed dramatically over the years, and — whether eagerly or reluctantly — its national organizations have evolved with it.

Gone are the days when landscape professionals didn't concern themselves with regulations, when sharing ideas was their primary focus.

In their place is a booming landscape industry that has grown exponentially from its more modest beginnings. It's confronted now by controversial environmental, immigration and water-related regulations.

Despite the changes, industry movers and shakers of past and present say the mutual support of fellow landscape professionals is one thing that hasn't changed.

The Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) original board member Tom Leid said what appealed to him first and foremost about ALCA was "that I was a young contractor at the time, and I was rubbing shoulders with some astute contractors from all over the country. I stood to learn a great deal from them."

Ultimately, he said. "I learned from them that landscape contracting is a business as worthwhile as any contracting business; it is not second rate. I thought I was a little pimple in the pond, but people looked to me, too."

Ron Kujawa joined ALCA in 1972 because "we felt it was in our best



interest to join a national group. Because there was a free exchange of ideas. Because you weren't sitting down with competitors and trying to outdo each other."

ALCA's founding fathers — a board of about 20 landscape professionals — had both good and bad ideas in the beginning, Leid said. Among the bad ideas, he said, were, first, that ALCA should limit competition and, second, ALCA should be a buying group. Actually, he said, "competition is the best thing for an astute company" and "we discovered that being a major buying group wasn't acceptable as a goal."

The group's good ideas, Leid said, centered on contactors' emphasis on listening to and learning from one another, as well as teaching the next generation that they were businesspeople first, artisans second, Leid said.

When ALCA merged with the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) about six years ago to form the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), those educational ideals were not lost.

Today, PLANET has adapted to present day issues, but, as in older times, its leadership still strives to provide answers to its members and students who will shape the landscape industry of tomorrow.

Kurt Kluznik, who in 2005 was ALCA's final president before it merged with PLCAA to form PLANET, is now a PLANET board member and has

served as a PLANET Trailblazer for three years. He and other Trailblazers mentor students and other industry newcomers.

"These students are going to hit the deck running. They're going to hit it in fourth gear," he said. "The rate of innovation in the industry will continue to accelerate based on these young people's enthusiasm and technological knowledge."

In his 40 years in the business, Kluznik's seen lots of change in the industry's national organizations. PLANET experienced growing pains at first, Kluznik said, but by now it has matured and established a firm identity.

Combining the networking-savvy ALCA and the government affairs-savvy PLCAA "created a more powerful, influential group" in PLANET, he said.

With the merger, ALCA and PLCAA morphed from medium-sized businesses "with strained resources," Kluznik said, "to a much larger business with much larger resources."

PLANET provides valuable strategic insights into what is happening in the landscape marketplace, and therefore has immersed itself in major issues such as sustainability, immigration, water use and more, Kluznik said.

"Our industry was green before the term 'green' was even coined," he said. "Now 'green' has taken on a whole new meaning.... The environment — both figuratively and literally — has changed dramatically in the last 10 years."

As for the industry's national organizations, perhaps Kujawa said it best: "Belonging to ALCA and subsequently to PLANET has had a profound impact upon my personal and professional growth. I think the most important thing I've ever learned in life is to know what I didn't know." As a result of sharing ideas with others in national organizations, he said, "I was able to find out things from people who did know."