

PROGRESS

Change with the times

David Frank's rapid-fire speech emerges so fast, it's hard to keep up. So it's no surprise the first words out of his mouth are: "I speak quickly."

But Frank's speech also reflects the impressive quickness of his mind.

The 62-year-old president and chief executive of Germantown, WI-based David J. Frank Landscape Contracting (DJFLC) has helmed his company since its inception 52 years ago.

Yes, the math is correct: Frank launched his company when he was just 10 years old, caring for his neighbors' yards. Five decades later, his innate drive is intact as he still serves some of his first clients — and many more.

Frank's total recall says more about the type of businessman he is than perhaps anything else. He can recite every address he ever worked on — going back decades — and recount the exact work he did on each property.

"I could freak you out," he says. We first wrote about Frank 25 years ago, in

David Frank relaxes in the gardens outside DJFLC headquarters.



For more than five decades David J. Frank has evolved with a shifting industry.



February 1986, when he had just become president of the Milwaukee Chapter of the Wisconsin Landscape Contractors Association.

His company was growing at 60% annually, and he had 19 crews working for him.

"It doesn't feel like 25 years ago to me," says Frank, who today has 96 crews and a staff of 325. "It's amazing when you look in the rearview mirror how fast time passes."

There's a lot to see in that rearview mirror. DJFLC's regular clientele has blossomed from about 600 in 1986 to 1,500 today. Along the way, the company accumulated more than 650 awards, dating back to 1978.

Industry evolves, too

The Green Industry Frank supports has also soared.

It's "wonderful to be part of," says Frank, whose company installs green roofs that mitigate energy use and reduce storm water runoff. "When I was starting out, there was far less legislation and environmental awareness. Now people are concerned about the possibility that planet Earth is becoming a toxic landfill that won't support human life unless changes are made."

In our 1986 feature, Frank noted the burgeoning professionalism in the industry. Today, he says, that professionalism is deeply rooted.

"The landscape practice has become much more sophisticated," he says.

He cites today's broader use of layering, color and traditional materials.

"People want color.

They want music in the landscape area. They want outdoor kitchens, fireplaces and play areas," Franks says. "Clients' attitudes have changed. The public is much more educated."

Just as the landscape industry has changed, so has Frank. Early on, he just wanted to make a living. Today, the man who has logged more than 1,000 global scuba dives and is inspired largely by Antoni Gaudí's Barcelona Sagrada Família cathedral is most concerned with cultivating his staff and continuing to grow his business.

That growth has slowed to less than 5% annually in the face of an economic downturn and rising fuel and insurance costs that have "squeezed operating margins," he says. But the company has avoided layoffs.

Frank maintains the company's staff has been key to its longtime success. When things go awry, Frank doesn't blame his staff. Instead, he says, "I pick up a mirror and I look at it and say, 'Now you know who is causing you all this grief.' In the end, it doesn't matter who did it. It's what do we do about it. My mirror reminds me to look forward, not backward."

Frank doesn't look back much. "It's one of my shortcomings," he says, "because there are a lot of things to be proud of."