

# Side *by* side



Competitors Laura McMurray and Michael Ackerman share office space at work and a life together.

**T**hey say “If you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em.” Or, if you’re Laura McMurray and Michael Ackerman, join in matrimony.

When the competing landscaping business owners decided to share space to save money, they ended up sharing so much more.

“Ultimately, the two of us fell madly in love,” says McMurray. “You are now speaking to two fierce competitors who are (almost) married. We still compete and run separate businesses side by side.”

As of press time the pair had yet to make their personal commitment official, but they considered themselves married. As far as the businesses are concerned, though they share the same grounds, they remain two separate entities.

“We have legally binding agreements, both personally and professionally,” McMurray says. “We have pro-

## *Two landscape industry competitors decide to share space and find a whole lot more than they bargained for.*

BY **DAN JACOBS**

tected ourselves as much as any business owner would. We have worked too hard for our respective successes or failures, and neither one of us would ever be willing to jeopardize one another’s security or our employees’ livelihoods.”

It all started with a plan to save a little money. Ackerman, who runs Michael’s Complete Lawn Care and focuses on the Wichita, Kan., area, had a facility

that included too much office and not enough yard for his dirt and mulch.

McMurray, whose Complete Landscaping Systems is more nationally focused, had the opposite problem. She wasn’t using her yard.

That’s when she decided to give Ackerman a call.

They planned to meet in early 2013 for an hour to discuss some options. The pair now considers that meeting to be their first date.

In fact, Ackerman used an old-fashioned first date ploy just in case things weren’t working out; he had one of his trusted employees call him after an hour, which gave him an out if he needed one.

“I guess I was OK for that first hour,” McMurray says. “Six hours later we were still brainstorming. From that first face-to-face meeting, we’ve never really left each other’s side.”

McMurray and Ackerman estimate they'll each save about \$65,000 a year by sharing the facility and related costs, such as trash and utilities. And that does not include the bulk buying power they have or the increased revenue from subcontracting work to the other.

Factoring all the elements, Ackerman thinks they might each be able to have a \$100,000 impact from the arrangement.

The pair admits their employees had some initial concerns. And even though they have different management styles, the staffs have since bought into the new approach.

"I'm probably a bit more firm," McMurray says.

"And a bit more hands on," Ackerman adds.

"I'm a bit of a control freak," McMurray admits.

On the other hand, Ackerman says, "I'm of the belief you provide them with the tools; you provide them with the systems and then you back off."

But at the end of the day, one of the nicest things about having a spouse in the business, Ackerman and McMurray say, is having someone who truly understands your problems.

"For us to be able to simply vent to one another, it's almost as if we absorb about 50 percent of each other's stress," Ackerman says. **LM**

*Jacobs is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*

## AT A GLANCE

### Complete Landscaping Systems

**Revenue:** \$13 million

**Employees:** 115 in 38 states

Laura McMurray purchased Complete Landscaping Systems four years ago and has grown the company from \$1.2 million to \$13 million. The company has been on the *Inc.* 5000 list of fastest-growing companies for the past four years and is No. 97 on the *LM150*.



### Michael's Complete Lawn Care

**Revenue:** \$3.5 million

**Employees:** 60

Michael Ackerman started his company as a way to make some extra money during high school. By the time he was 16 years old, he had revenue of \$1 million. He made a deal with a private school he was attending to

trade out grounds maintenance services for his tuition. "At the time it made sense to me," he says. "They probably got the better deal."



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