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# Giving It All

Virginia landscaper sees steady growth through unique ideas, great customer service

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Starting out in 1993 as a way to fund a law degree, Mike Anderson had little idea that his small landscaping business would grow into what it is today – a thriving 21-year-old business in the Roanoke, Virginia, area.

Anderson started Varsity Landscaping and Grounds while he was attending Virginia Western Community College with an eye toward going on to Virginia Tech and an even longer-term goal of going to law school. “It was supposed to be a means to produce some cash to help pay for law school,” Anderson says. “I was a year from graduation at Tech, and I just decided that I enjoyed it. I liked the industry, so I left Tech and pursued Varsity full time.”

## Humble beginnings

After working for a local landscaper in the area through high school, Anderson quickly gained a passion, skillset and client list for starting his own business. “When I first started out, it was out of a little Mitsubishi pickup truck, and I had a push mower and a weed eater that I borrowed from my dad to get started,” he says.

After moving out of his parent’s garage, Anderson and another friend start operating two separate landscaping businesses out of the same house. “Both of us were running our small companies out of the backyard of this rental,

which was like a frat house with lawnmowers,” Anderson says.

However, after the city addressed some zoning issues, Anderson was forced to move out and eventually purchased the property where

Varsity sits today. With aspiration and determination, his business quickly grew from doing basic mow and mulch jobs to offering a variety of services such as lawn treatments, landscape installation, hardscaping, curbside leaf pickup and loose-leaf collection.

“I always wanted to be bigger and better,” Anderson says. “I was always striving to be the best, be more knowledgeable and provide the better customer service.”

The business has grown to employ about 20 people, including Anderson’s two right-hand men: operations manager Justin Carr and landscape designer Jason Childress.

Childress handles the design work, ordering the plants and visiting nurseries

while Carr maintains equipment for the foremen and crews. “They’re my go-to people,” Anderson says. “That’s who makes it all happen and holds it all together.”

## Competitive edge

Just like many landscapers across the country, Anderson and his team were no strangers to the recession that hit in 2008. But, as he would in any tough situation, Anderson rose to the challenge and found the silver lining. “We were very efficient in our operations, and in some ways,



Water features are a staple in the Virginia area, including this waterfall constructed with natural boulders flowing into a koi pond.



Creating an outdoor space for clients has become a popular trend in the Roanoke area. (Left) This particular project features a patio with a parapet wall, column kits and a firepit. (Right) At the end of curved stairs made of stone lies a patio built of pavers also featuring a firepit.



the recession almost helped us, because we were not a real big company, but we were a strong, honest and reliable company," he says.

When the recession hit, Varsity had an opportunity to get a foot in the door and prove itself as a company. "We were doing well, and we operated so efficiently and were able to create such value that we started to grow and the others shrank," Anderson says. "We started to increase market share as people started to shop."

In addition to gaining good help after competitors laid off their own workers, Varsity began looking for new, innovative ways to create more value for its clients. The company started advertising a \$99 plant install deal. If clients purchased plants from Varsity, crews would install the entire purchase for only \$99.

"It blew up," Anderson says. "When we started saying we'll install the entire thing for \$99, people started going, 'Wow, if we put two trees here and do the entire front of the house, you'll do that for \$99?' Instead of doing two trees, we'd be replacing their entire landscape, because they were trying to capitalize on only spending \$99."

A time that was extremely difficult for many businesses turned out to be quite beneficial for Varsity. The company increased planting by nearly 500 percent, giving it a competitive edge for growth during that period.

In addition to creating appealing deals, the company has also capitalized on its loose-leaf collection service. Because finding quality topsoil in the



The company has a broad spectrum of clients, including everything from senior executives with second homes to individuals who want simple lawn treatments. Part of their portfolio includes designing and maintaining this commercial property in the area.

Roanoke area can be challenging, the loose leaves are taken for composting. To help solve the topsoil problem, Varsity continues to use a soil screener to filter the soil and then blends the remainder with 50 percent compost. The company now produces, sells and uses quality topsoil at all of its jobsites.



Although Varsity does not do irrigation, the company's landscape designs are created to help with potential drainage issues like this perennial garden that features a dry creek bed and boulder wall.



The mountainous Virginia landscape can create quite a challenge for Anderson and his crew. However, the company works to create solutions exemplified in this embankment, which has been stabilized by boulders and ornamental plants.

### Family first

Anderson knows he's not an easy person to work for, which is why one of his biggest challenges for the company is finding good help. "Everyone wants a job, but not everyone wants to work," Anderson says. "If you talk to any of the guys, there is no one that is going to tell you that Mike Anderson is an easy person to work for, but I also don't think any of them will tell you that I'm an unfair person to work for."

The company prides itself on promoting from within and requires foremen to train another employee to take their position before he or she

can move up in the company. "By doing that, we end up with a much more qualified group of people and that's one of the ways we have developed a good, strong and solid staff," Anderson says.

He also believes that family always comes first. "Family is huge, and I think of all the staff here as family," Anderson says. "I think that they think of me and other members of the staff the same way."

### On the right path

On most days, it's not unusual

for Anderson to walk into the office wearing flip flops, a T-shirt and shorts toting what he calls his "Jimmy-Buffer lifestyle."

"I like being outside, and my wife always laughs and tells me how I would never make it in the corporate world, and it's a good thing that I chose the direction that I did," Anderson says.

His laid-back mentality overflows – if only slightly – into his business strategy and goals for the company. "I don't want to say let it go where the wind takes us, but to a degree, that is kind of how I feel," Anderson says. "What's important to me is I want my staff to be able to provide for their families and grow. I want to grow and be profitable, but in a responsible manner."

To Anderson, gross numbers are not always an indicator of profit and he believes by putting the right pieces in the right place, the company will form its own path of success. "That's what I have done up until now, and it has always worked," he says. "Why fix it if it's not broken?"

As for himself, Anderson believes he picked the right path at the end of the day. "I enjoy what I'm doing, and I'm pretty passionate about it," Anderson says. "I think in hindsight I would have been pretty unhappy with all of the endless desk hours I would have had as an attorney." **tlc**