

# Projects of the Heart



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Embrace the team and culture-building power of community service



About 40 volunteer workers completed landscape projects on four sites near downtown Louisville during the first-ever PLANET Gives Back event in October.

Landscape and lawn service company owners and their employees are providing more community service than ever before. Inexplicably, this spirit of giving seems to be spreading in spite of what many feel is the most challenging economic environment yet faced by the industry.

Small or large, established or newly started, it doesn't appear to matter; everyone is getting into the act. Examples are easy to find.

Robert "Bobby" Vaughn and Kip Henderson are partners in two-year-old Alpha and Omega Landscaping, Cartersville, Ga., and are donating 10 percent of their company's gross each month to charities within their main market of Bartow County.

"We're the company that wants to give back," says Vaughn. "There are a lot of needy families in our country, and it's our way of helping out."

In addition, this past November they offered free leaf cleanups to customers who donated cash, food, clothing, blankets, coats and toys for boys and girls in the county. They called their promotion "Spread the Joy."



Louisville-based The Lawn Pro and Steele Blades served as "champions" for PLANET Gives Back. Here Alex Fransen of Steele Blades lays out the afternoon's plan.

Spring Green Lawn Care Owner Dave Vojta this past spring donated \$3,500 to outfit a classroom at Illinois Valley Central High School (IVC), Chillicothe,

Ill., with a SMART Board, the 21st century version of the blackboard, only way, way more advanced. Think giant iPad-like learning tool. He was the first businessperson in his community to write a check to equip an IVC school's classroom with a SMART Board. Other local citizens and businesses followed his example.

## **What's going on?**

After weeks of phone calls, emails and other research, I have come to the conclusion that it's impossible to pin down the full extent of the industry's civic-minded activities.

There are large, well-publicized examples, of course, such as the industry's incredible participation in PLANET's annual July Renewal and Remembrance (R&R) service project at Arlington National Cemetery. With the 15th anniversary approaching, hundreds of volunteers – PLANET members, their families and a long list of vendors – have just about maxed out what R&R organizers can handle. Then there's PLANET's Day of Service that attracts an ever-growing number of industry participants each Earth Day (See sidebar).

It's easy to evaluate these efforts, at least in terms of number of volunteers, donated man-hours, materials and scope of services provided. All of that is reported and measured. But, we're learning anecdotally and from press accounts from around the United States and Canada of many more examples of landscape business owners and their employees "paying forward" to their communities and to others in need. Even so, most civic kindness or generosity, we suspect, is never reported or draws little attention from the public at large.

There must be a lot more going on here than merely a desire to attract favorable attention to yourself or your company, says Glenn Jacobsen, owner of Jacobsen Landscape Design and Construction Midland Park, N.J. Done for the right reasons, it's a powerful "team builder" and infuses your company with a culture of service. You can't overestimate the value of a company culture of service to others, whether in the course of normal business or charitable endeavors, he says.

## **A special industry**

"Community service isn't for everyone. You have to have a passion for it. You do it because you want to do it. You have to sincerely want to help someone," says Jacobsen.

Landscape and lawn service owners comprise one of the hardest-working and most generous service sectors in America. We're even more convinced after being a part of the October 26 PLANET Gives Back project in Louisville, Ky., for which Jacobsen served as organizer and leader.

Here's a short recap of that particular event that took place about a mile south of downtown Louisville the day before the start of the 2011 GIE+EXPO.



New Jersey landscaper Glenn Jacobsen says PLANET Gives Back will grow.

Volunteer workers at the Engelhard Elementary School briefly paused from pulling weeds from beneath shrubs and glanced anxiously skyward at the sound of thunder. What they saw wasn't encouraging – threatening, slate-colored clouds scudding west to east. Almost on cue, cold raindrops spotted their hats and jackets and fell on the 32 other landscapers and manufacturers' reps scattered in small groups cleaning and renovating landscapes at the school and three other nearby properties.

## **Working in Louisville**

So unfolded this first-ever PLANET Gives Back service project that Jacobsen volunteered to lead 10 months previously at a meeting of the PLANET GIC (Green Industry Conference) Committee.

Jacobsen isn't a superstitious person. He is, however and unabashedly, a person of faith, and he's convinced that good deeds rarely go unrewarded. True to that conviction (and providentially) the rain stopped soon after it had started. The brief shower had no effect on the 40 volunteers. They continued working on the grounds of the school as well as the Bridgehaven Mental Health Services, Heuser Hearing Institute and The Center for Women and Families.

Working through that Wednesday afternoon's damp chill, the volunteers completed their assignments within the planned four-hour window. They were able to accomplish this in large part due to pre-event logistical support provided by local resident Rick Cuddihe, two local companies and a half-dozen or more suppliers who provided labor (John Deere's Ken Taylor and Kristina Welm), equipment or plants and mulch.

But this story isn't about this particular service project. Or about Jacobsen, who led the project and says he will continue to grow it as long as PLANET members return to Louisville for the GIC.

This story is about what community betterment projects mean to those of you providing them, and to the organizations and the people your generous services help. It's also about what you must know to produce optimum benefits for everyone – including you and your company.

"You do business to make money, build a company, build people," says Jacobsen. "That's not why you do community service, because you're not going to make money. You do community service because you have a desire to help other people. You want to leave a positive mark. You want that personal satisfaction that comes from helping. I think most people feel that way."

## **Special Saturdays**

These aren't hollow words. Jacobsen, who founded his company 33 years ago, asks his employees to devote at least one nonpaid Saturday each year to community service – and they do. Six or seven years ago, Jacobsen says he selected the projects. Now his employees usually identify, plan and do most

of them on their own. Recruiting and working in small groups, they often complete five or six projects annually, usually benefiting the green spaces within neighborhoods where they live.

“They come in with an idea, usually in the summer, and we look at it to see if it matches up with what we have the capacity to do. The employees figure out what they need, whether it’s trucks, machines or men. They find the vendors to give them materials and vendors generally cooperate,” says Jacobsen.

Regardless of who comes up with the idea for the service, they must have a passion for it, says Jacobsen. Generally, that’s the person that leads the effort, too.



## **Credit Where Credit is Due**

What’s wrong with being recognized for providing selfless service to our communities or needy organizations or families? Nothing of course.

“If you promote what you’re doing it’s a good example for other companies in your community. It challenges them to do the same,” Vicki Bendure, president of Washington D.C.-based Bendure Communications, told volunteer workers just prior to the PLANET Gives Back community service event at the 2011 GIE+EXPO in Louisville.

While recognition for being a good corporate citizen isn’t the primary reason for engaging in community-building activities, it certainly doesn’t hurt.

Unfortunately, there are many reasons why most service projects, regardless of scope or the good they do, never get recognized. Two of the biggest reasons are probably modesty, which is understandable, and lack of time or knowledge (generally a combination of both) of how to get positive attention from the media.

Bendure offers these suggestions for working with the press.

1. Prepare and send a press release to your local media. Generally, small neighborhood newspapers (especially “good news” weekly papers) love to share anything that casts their communities or local businesses in a positive light. After all, you might become an advertiser. Don’t overlook local radio stations either. Don’t know how to do a press release? You will find a complete planning guide for your project, including a sample press release by visiting [planetdayofservice.org](http://planetdayofservice.org).
2. You can heighten interest in your project by sending the appropriate media personnel something like a T-shirt or a live plant to remind them of your event.
3. Consider inviting the media to participate in your project.
4. Invite local dignitaries, a mayor or other VIPs, and allow them an

opportunity to say a few words to kick off the event.

5. Before the event, scout out an appropriate location and determine who will speak for your company should someone from the media seek an interview. If you're expecting television coverage, you need a location that lends itself to audio/video. Remember, nothing is "off the record" during an interview.

6. Make sure your trucks and equipment are clean and you and other volunteers (especially if they're your employees) are appropriately dressed. Don't forget signage.

7. Safety. Safety. Safety. Everyone must follow all precautions in keeping themselves and any other participants or bystanders from harm. Educate yourself to any possible insurance or liability issues.

8. Don't plan events for a Monday or the weekends, if possible, if you're hoping for media coverage. Tuesday through Thursday are the best days.

9. After the event, follow up with a news release with links to your website where the media can download additional information and images of the project.

## **Develop a process**

Over the years, Jacobsen has developed some thoughts about how to provide community service. Check these out; they will work for you, too.

- Having trouble identifying a good project to start with? "Every community has an organization that knows the needs of the area and will help volunteers organize and fill those needs," says Jacobsen. In the case of the PLANET Gives Back effort, it was Metro United Way Louisville.
- Meet with the organization or individuals you will be helping and get their input. "Ask about their specific needs and listen just like you would in a sales call," says Jacobsen. Are there any special considerations that you or your volunteers should be aware of in providing the service? Find out.
- Once the decision has been made to undertake a project, establish ground rules and what you'll need, if anything, in terms of in-kind volunteers, supplies, bathroom facilities, drinks, lunch, etc.
- Fall, when the busy season is over, is generally the best time to perform community service for most landscape companies. Begin planning weeks or months ahead, depending on the scope of the project, prior to the event. Plan just like you would for any for-profit job.
- Match the project to the resources and manpower that you can devote to it. There's nothing wrong with starting small.
- Assign "champions" to oversee the project or various aspects of the project. You need strong leadership.
- Create a schedule and a time line realizing that sometimes you have more leeway in providing the service or product than you ordinarily would because most nonprofits have a longer time line and will graciously take

whatever assistance you can provide.

- Ask your vendors to help with materials and equipment, if needed. Make sure they are recognized with signage or in any press releases or other communications.
- Have fun and enjoy the project. You and your employees are volunteers, so all of you can lighten up on everything except safety.
- Celebrate the event and give special recognition to the people that contributed to the success of each project. This is incredibly important.

"It's wonderful to be able to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and sometimes giving your time and your service is more valuable than giving money," says Jacobsen. "I believe we all have gifts, talents and skills that we can use to help others. And we can make a huge difference in our communities when we give with our hands and our feet."

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Buckingham Greenery provided youngsters with plants and pots, which they decorated and shared with children at VCU Children's Medical Center. PHOTO COURTESY OF BUCKINGHAM GREENERY.

Not every service we provide pro bono for our communities or the less fortunate within them has to be gangbusters, or involve a lot our workers, our time, materials or expense. Some of our most appreciated and more memorable contributions might, in fact, be relatively modest.

Connie Hom's voice takes on an enthusiastically lyrical quality as she recalls a memorable service project her company undertook in 2010. Her company, Buckingham Greenery, regularly performs gratis projects within its central Virginia market. Few have been quite so fun as one of the five it sponsored as part of PLANET's Day of Service that particular April 22.

Buckingham Greenery provided the children of the employees at a large Richmond, Va., law office with live plants and biodegradable 4-inch pots. Buckingham volunteers helped the children pot their plants, but it was up to each youngster to decorate their own pot with colorful permanent markers.

"The children drew happy faces or flowers or wrote little sayings on their pots. They got very creative," says Hom. "When they were done, the pots with their plants were donated to the VCU Children's Medical Center. Everyone had fun, and the donations were greatly appreciated by the children in the hospital."



The Lambert Landscape team helped with several Dallas-area home and property improvement projects.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAMBERT LANDSCAPE COMPANY.

The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) has designated Friday, April 20 (2012 Earth Day is Sunday, April 22), for its fourth annual Day of Service. In spite of occurring during the busiest time of the year for landscape and lawn service professionals, the annual event continues to grow. In 2011, about 3,200 individuals participated in more than 200 projects in 43 states and Canada last year, says Heather Finney of PLANET.

Employees at Lambert Landscape Company and many of their family members join with local vendors to annually donate their time and services in their Dallas market as part of the Day of Service.

This past year they helped paint two houses in a single day, and then returned on a second Saturday to install a landscape that they designed as part of the Dallas Dream House Design Competition. Lambert Landscape was one of three primary sponsors of the event. The design competition offered an opportunity for a team of architectural professionals or students to create a new design and look for a single family Habitat for Humanity home for future deserving, low-income Dallas Habitat homeowners.

“Providing community service opportunities to our employees fosters a sense of community and camaraderie that is difficult to achieve otherwise,” says Lara Moffat, MLA, director of marketing and recruitment for the 92-year-old landscape company. “It also speaks, both internally and externally, about the values of Lambert’s.”

For more information about the 2012 PLANET Day of Service, log on to [www.planetdayofservice.org](http://www.planetdayofservice.org).