

Flying High in Canada

Maintenance business takes off for former flight attendant

What a difference a few decades can make. During the mid 1970s, Sarah Johnston was a flight attendant for British Caledonia Airways, jetting around the world in a Boeing 707. Today, her itinerary is slightly less robust, as she and her son, Dave, install and maintain landscapes for homeowners in and around Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

"I was more adventuresome back then," says Sarah, who left her airline job and native country of England in 1978 to marry and start a family in Canada. For the next several years, she worked in marketing and public relations for two non-profit organizations. After that she worked at a printing company before starting her own company, Greenlife, Inc., Garden Care + Landscaping, located in Manotick, Ontario.

"When the printing company closed its branch in Ottawa seven years ago, I was left with no job," Sarah recalls. "It was September and a girlfriend of mine had an herb garden that she couldn't maintain because of allergies. I helped her out, and then she planted another seed. 'Why don't you start a landscaping company?' she asked. Well, I loved gardening, but it would be a big step for me to start a business, but that's just what I did."

Sarah called her son, Dave, who worked for an area commercial landscape maintenance company. He agreed to join in the venture with his mother, and together they launched Greenlife six years ago.

Sarah admits that the first year was rather difficult. They had two part-time employees, a capital investment of close to \$30,000, and Dave's salary to cover. A federal government program to assist new startup companies

allowed Sarah to get some money to help pay her salary for 12 months.

SAVVY MARKETER

With not a customer in sight (other than her herb garden friend), Sarah immediately made two strategic moves: joined Landscape Ontario and mailed out a newsletter. "Since I didn't know anything about running a landscaping business, including how to price my services, I thought it was important to network with professionals within the industry," Sarah recalls. "Joining the association also sent a message to prospective customers that I was serious about my business and was in it for the long haul.

"Having been in marketing for so many years, I understood the importance of communicating with prospective customers," Sarah continues. "I hired a professional to write and develop a newsletter and mailed it to more than 6,000 area residents." This single move attracted her first customers. By the end of 2004, the new company had serviced 18 lawn maintenance customers (Dave's accounts) and a handful of garden maintenance customers (Sarah's accounts). Their modest equipment lineup included a used Kubota rider, a

Mother and son work well together, with Dave running the lawn maintenance operation and Sarah managing the garden side of the business.





Dave removes the collection hopper during the summer months to reduce weight and lower the mower's center of gravity.

1989 truck and a VW Golf, along with two trailers, a string line trimmer and a backpack blower.

For the first four years, lawn maintenance was the young company's bread and butter. Dave mowed with a used Kubota rider the first year, but in year two they purchased their first Walker Mower. Dave had operated a Walker at his previous job and thought it would be the perfect machine for the job. According to Sarah, it was.

"We grew to 44 lawns that second year, with a 100-percent increase in revenue, and increased that number to 70 lawns a year later, thanks in large part to the Walker Mower. All along, we never wanted to mow more than three days a week. Dave and I both think it is important to give our employees a vari-

ety of work. Mowing five days a week, or doing anything five days a week for that matter, can become tiresome."

The mother-and-son team purchased its second Walker Mower in 2007. Still mowing with only three crew members, Dave put the second mower to good use. It allowed him to procure larger properties and still keep to his three-day schedule. By year's end, the second purchase had helped the company to a healthy 68-percent increase in revenue from the previous year.

"We attribute the increase to our Walker Mowers," says Sarah. "The mowers are efficient and leave a beautiful cut, and really have helped define our business. When looking at new accounts, we want to make sure we can use our Walker Mowers on them. If you would have told me that I would one day have such loyalty to a mower, I

wouldn't have believed it. Now I would be absolutely horrified if we were forced to use a different machine."

UNUSUAL APPROACH

Dave agrees with his mom. "We have two identical mowers, each powered by diesel engines and equipped with two decks, a 48-inch GHS deck and a 48-inch side-discharge deck. We employ the GHS decks for a week or so in the spring for picking up clippings, and for three weeks in the fall for leaf pickup. In between we remove the collection hoppers and use the side-discharge decks. This makes the mowers lighter and lowers their center of gravity.

"Part of my original attraction to the mower is its versatility, and nothing leaves a better cut," Dave adds. He goes on to say that his three-person mowing crew now averages 20 lawns a day.

They've reduced the number of lawns they mow to 45 a week, which means that mowing accounts for approximately half the work week. The other half is devoted to helping out the growing installation business, which Sarah refers to as "Garden Creations."

When asked how he felt about leaving a lawn maintenance company to join his mother, Dave remarks, "After she first asked me, I said to myself, 'No, I'm not going to work with my mom.' But I'm very happy I did. She's not only great to work with, but she's also very professional in every way."

GREEN THUMB

Being born and raised in England, Sarah naturally comes by a love for gardening. But it wasn't until she made contacts with local landscape architects that her installation business took off.

"Again, I have to attribute my relationship with Landscape Ontario for much of our success," Sarah emphasizes. "Just getting to know the architect members has been a terrific boon to our business. In addition to the three individuals on our mow crew, we employ seven horticulturists who spend part of the week designing and installing gardens and the other part maintaining them. Again, we are very sensitive to 'burning out' our employees. We want to make sure they have some variety in their work week."

Thinking back, Sarah says that the first four years in business were very strenuous. But now she has assembled a great crew, and the fact that her company employs a full-time office person has freed the owner to do more selling and communicating with clients. "I've been told that the rule of thumb for hiring an office person is having eight employees," Sarah relates. "It certainly applies to our situation."

What also applies is that true success requires having a strong relationship with several partners. In Sarah's case, her husband and co-owner of the business, Richard Sennott, has been supportive from day one. "Richard is Executive Director of the Ottawa



Top left to right: Dave Johnston, Jen Hendriks, Gang Liu, Jeff Lloyd

Bottom left to right: Melissa Clark, Josee Henderson, Tina Lockett, Sarah Johnston, Mary Stewart

Missing: Laura Lyons and Pat Doucette

District Hockey Association," says Sarah. "His life is hockey, as opposed to gardens, but he has been there every step of the way offering advice and encouragement."

Walker dealer B&T MacFarlane in Ottawa has also been a significant contributor to the company's success. "From day one, they've treated our small company the same way they would treat one of their larger customers," Sarah says. "It's amazing, and when you have only one or two mowers you depend on, your dealer's responsiveness is critical."

The Greenlife owner also recognizes how important it is to be a partner within her community. Sarah's company actively supports various causes, including the local cancer foundation.

In fact, this year her company is mowing the home of a foundation raffle winner—free of charge.

Sarah doesn't fret about the future, thanks to another strong relationship she has with another partner. "I don't wear my religion and beliefs on my sleeve, but I am a Christian and believe that the Lord has a calling for me. If I work hard and do what's right, He will help me find my way."

Indeed, Sarah is flying high in Canada. The days of jetting around the world are long gone (although she travels back to England once a year to visit her mom, brother and friends). In its place, however, she has landed a career that will take her further than any airplane ever would. **WT**