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## Monico's love of the outdoors propelled him into lawn, landscape business

*Editor's Note: This is one of a series of profiles featuring Midlands Business Journal 40 Under 40 award winners — entrepreneurs, business owners, managers and professional men and women under 40 years of age. The 2003 awards were co-sponsored by Gateway Community Bank, Stinson Morrison Hecker law firm and Right Management Consultants.*

by **Stephanie Critser**

A love of the outdoors was one of the catalysts that led Chuck Monico, owner of CM's Custom Lawn and Landscape in Bellevue, to start his own business in 1987.

"I remember playing around in my parents' yard and wanting it to look nice," he said. "I started when I was 12 or 13, doing my parents' yard and the neighbors' yards and picking up contracts here and there.

"I started out just mowing and grew with fertilizing and aerating. I did that until I went to college. Then I hired a couple of guys and kept the business going, helping out as much as I could."

After receiving an accounting degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Monico took a position as an accountant and auditor with a local firm.

"I worked there from 1992 to 1996, but I still had the lawn business," he said. "It came down to the fact that I had to make a choice.

"I chose to continue with the business I had started. It's hard to work indoors all day when you like to be outside and active."

In 1995 Dan Zoucha joined the business, and the company added commercial services, irrigation and landscape design and installation. CM's



**Monico at a project site in Bellevue ... "It's hard to work indoors all day when you like to be outside and active."**

Custom Lawn and Landscape now has 1,500 commercial and residential clients and 25 to 30 employees during the peak season.

"We started an irrigation-only division in Kansas City last year," Monico said. "Landscape lighting was added in the last few years. It was unheard of 10 years ago.

"Our client list includes several banking and financial institutions and various commercial businesses. Projects range from \$2,000 jobs to more than \$100,000."

While picking up new clients is great, Monico said, the company looks to current clients and their referrals to generate new business rather than spending lots of money on marketing.

"We might shift our marketing dollars to acquisitions," he said. "We bought Heartland Irrigation two years ago and gained its 300 clients."

Monico attributes his success to a great deal of hard work and a good attitude.

"On top of that, we make an investment in our people," he said. "We've always been

team players, but Dan and I realized in 1998 that we needed to take it to the next level.

"We bring the business to our people and establish positive attitudes and peer pressure. We want to create a more professional image for our industry and give employees the opportunity to work in an enjoyable atmosphere."

CM's Custom Lawn and Landscape offers several full-day, paid training sessions every year to cover topics like financial statements, budgeting, marketing and sales.

"We want every employee to know the entire process," Monico said. "We bring it home to the bottom line about how we can create a better environment and all share in the bonuses.

"We bring in consultants from around the U.S. and build relationships with other companies, competitors and contractors."

Monico has established a rigorous hiring process for the company.

"We want quality people who are reliable and fit in with the culture we've created," he said. "The hiring process contains an application, a timed cognitive skills test, an employee reliability index survey, a personality trait survey for some positions, an interview and a post-offer, pre-hire drug screen.

"Out of 130 applicants this year, we interviewed only 20 and hired eight. I want to put people in the right positions so they can succeed."

Over the years Monico has seen a trend to more natural landscaping.

"We're seeing interlocking block walls, manmade walls and ties transitioning to boulders and flagstone," he said. "The whole idea of landscape has changed a thousand percent.

"It used to be that a couple of trees and some tulips would be considered landscaping for homes, and a few trees, some juniper bushes and white rock made up commercial landscaping. Now homeowners are treating their homes like a large company, getting rid of weeds and debris and adding various landscape elements."

Irrigation has become critical, Monico said.

"The companies that manufacture the equipment need to make it more efficient," he said. "The equipment needs to use and manage water wisely, especially in

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drought conditions.

“It’s critical to pay attention to features like rain sensors, heads to regulate pressure and drip irrigation.”

A native of Omaha, Monico graduated from Daniel J. Gross High School. He lives in Bellevue with his wife, Marlo,

and their children, Carmella, 4, Michael, 3, and Charles, 1.

“I’m fortunate to have a good supporting family from my parents and grandparents to my siblings,” he said. “I also had outstanding mentors in high school — instructors and coaches.”

Monico is the executive

director of the Nebraska Professional Lawncare Association and is on the finance committee for St. Bernadette Catholic Church and Gross High School. He has served on the Gross High School advisory board. The company is a member of the Greater Omaha and Bellevue

Chambers of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau.

“We believe in giving back to the community,” Monico said. “We donated a project to the Children’s Hospital to redo the gardens, and we donate all the lawncare maintenance to St. Bernadette’s.”