

Pay Dirt!

by Lois Nuttall
Thunder Bay Ventures

Ryan Jones operated Landscape Management Systems from 92-95 during his high school years – cutting grass, landscaping, pushing himself hard while “learning valuable lessons dealing with people, negotiating rates and meeting expectations”.

In 1995, at 19, he invested in an opportunity presented by a family acquaintance – the ‘Gravel Doctor’ franchise. Gord Olsen created the ‘Gravel Doctor’ with Fred Stille – a small tractor like unit with a special attachment to maintain gravel roads, driveways etc. Unlike a conventional grader, the machine’s teeth broke up the hard pan base in the bowl of a driveway hole, and laid it down again so that water would drain. Ryan secured contracts with Avenor, the Conservation Authority, grain elevators, golf courses and rural customers to keep this machine working regularly. His life was a juggling act. Monday to Thursday, his days were centered on the Bachelor of Commerce program at LU; by night he wrote estimates, did administrative tasks and studied. Friday, Saturday and Sunday he actually did all the physical work for Gravel Doctor. Ryan operated a virtual office from his vehicle and found it a little difficult then to apply the ‘big business’ theories he learned about at LU to his own business situation.

In 1997, Ryan met Darren Henderson of Grass Masters, a like-minded landscaping entrepreneur who needed subsurface preparation and compaction work done for his lockstone and driveway contracts. As their working relationship evolved, the two discovered there was a very good synergy between them. They merged companies in 1998 and gave their business plan for the Gravel Doctor 3 years. If they couldn’t make it viable in that time, Darren and Ryan would find jobs more related to their education or work for others.

The two knew the company wouldn’t sustain itself with present products so they diversified with excavators and dump trucks which expanded their services to back filling, building prep work etc. The two worked 24/7 and were totally focused on business. They took out several loans and didn’t enjoy the luxury of drawing a salary for over 5 years. They enjoyed the ‘challenge of competition’ and being the underdog. Traditionally, businesses in this sector had been inherited or purchased. Darren and Ryan built relationships with customers, convinced them that they had the financial and technical abilities to do the job and did it on time. They spent untold hours learning – reading plans, asking questions, hiring good people and practicing self taught techniques.



Ryan Jones, Darren Henderson

EVERYDAY HEROES

- Here to Stay -

One successful strategy for them was the ‘flat rate quote’. In 2000 they secured a large contract with the City as a subcontractor and in 2001 bid successfully on their first road contract. From 2001-07, they extended and completed more services and many on a larger scale. Today, Thunder Bay is their primary market area but they see a regional and provincial market as well – with work done from Kenora to Sault Ste. Marie and in Ottawa and Hamilton. They now employ in excess of 90 employees April to Christmas and 35 full timers year round.

Their growth has been a planned, systematic process - Darren’s common sense and people skills are utilized in the operational side while Ryan’s management and business training guides their finances and administrative functions. They are able to make time now for family and community life and have turned down opportunities to move their operations to Western Canada. They value the lifestyle and opportunities Northwestern Ontario provides.

For hard, hard work, being role models for youth and helping to build our community, Ryan Jones and Darren Henderson are everyday heroes.

Ryan and Darren were nominated as Everyday Heroes by Bianca Garofalo.

Everyday Heroes is a Community initiative sponsored by Thunder Bay Ventures. Everywhere in the city there are people living, working, playing and contributing to the fabric of our community.

To nominate a hero email:
heroes@thunderbayventures.com
To see past heroes go to:
www.thunderbayventures.com