

Man finds lesson at every turn

Love of learning shapes business

By ESTEBAN PARRA

The News Journal

John Kerns left his nearly two-decade teaching career to pursue a tree-service business.

But he never forget his love of educating and passing knowledge on to others. That's what the 62-year-old has been doing through his volunteer efforts, which include helping clean up Wilmington's Riverview Cemetery; the Make a Wish Christmas Projects in which he and his company provide holiday tree service to needy families; and making sure he and staff members have time to help out at Delaware Center for Horticulture events.

Through all these efforts, Kerns takes the time to teach people about the importance of trees.

"I'm still a teacher, it's just a different age level," said Kerns, who before devoting himself full time to Kerns



John Kerns, a former teacher, now has a tree-service business.

Brothers Tree Service in Wilmington spent 19 years in the Colonial School District teaching math in grades six through eight.

"I've said it a number of times. If you don't learn something new in a day, then there is something wrong.

"Everybody should learn something new every single day and it shouldn't always be from someone who is more intelligent than you. Sometimes the person you consider the least intelligent knows something that you don't know and you just got to figure out what it is."

Through these educational and volunteer efforts, Kerns tries to pass on his love of nature, the outdoors and landscaping in a number of different ways.

"I also try to pass on to people that they are doing a good thing if they are volunteering," he said. "It's for a worthy cause, somebody less fortunate than you."

His efforts have not gone unnoticed.

For his volunteer and educational efforts, The News Journal is naming Kerns one of its 50 Who Matter, a series recognizing Delawareans who work behind the scenes to enrich the lives of others.

Next month, Kerns will be recognized at the 2011 Governor's Outstanding Volunteer Awards, where he will receive the Paul Wilkinson Lifetime Achievement Award for more than 30 years of educating people, improving the environment and donating countless hours of personnel, equipment and funding in support of community service projects.

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Kerns: Volunteer work a large part of man's life

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"John is someone who makes a huge difference in Delaware," Gov. Jack Markell said. "His selfless volunteerism demonstrates the long-lasting power of giving. John shows us what one person can do to change other people's lives."

Giving back

Lee Anderson, president of the board of Friends of Historic Riverview Cemetery, met Kerns in 2008 when her board partnered with his company for an ongoing Arbor Day event at the cemetery as part of the graveyard's revitalization efforts.

Trees at the cemetery were falling or dead, creating a hazardous environment, she said. Thanks to Kerns, who rallied other tree-service companies to help, the cemetery's landscape not only looks better, but is safe. "He would bring - the first year - about 14 other tree companies with him," she said. "So he was acting as a collaborator, not as a competitor."

Anderson added that Kerns' efforts are more than just caring about trees: "John is caring about relationships."

Jen Bruhler, assistant director of Urban Forestry at the Delaware Center for Horticulture in Wilmington, said Kerns helps them with children's events as well as the center's Return-to-Work program, which uses former inmates to plant trees.

In the Return-to-Work program, Kerns provides an employee to supervise the former offenders, who learn about tree care as well as job skills. Kerns' company also donates time for the center's Arbor Day celebrations, which includes providing staff to plant trees and tree climbers who teach children about climbing, as well as about parts of the tree.

"We know we can always count on him to lend a hand and support the cause and look after trees in Wilmington," she said.

Kerns got into the tree-service business in 1973 while going to college. The business initially began in Pennsylvania with his brothers, Lohr and Robert. John and Robert were working to get money for college, while Lohr wanted to supplement his income as a science teacher.

Kerns remembers his reaction when his brother first suggested the business idea.

"I thought it was ridiculous and I didn't think it would work," he said with a laugh. "But I said we'll give it a try."

Lohr Kerns left the business after three years, leaving it to John and Robert Kerns.

JOHN KERNS

AGE: 62

HOME: Brandywine Hundred

FAMILY: Wife, Susan Kerns, and three children

OCCUPATION: Owner of Kerns Brothers Tree Service

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: Treemendous News, a tri-annual newsletter; Riverview Cemetery cleanup; Make a Wish Christmas projects; and a sponsor of The News Journal's Newspaper in Education Classroom.

NOMINATIONS FOR OUR SERIES

Send nomination letters for 50 Who Matter to 50whomatter@delawareonline.com. Explain in 500 words or less your affiliation with the person being nominated and the kind of work he or she is doing to make our region a better place.

Watch a video story and read previous 50 Who Matter stories at delawareonline.com/50whomatter.

"He wasn't interested in growing the business and employees and I was," Kerns said.

The remaining brothers grew the business, eventually moving it to Wilmington in 1980.

Tree-service business

In the business' early years, Kerns said, he did a lot of wrong things with trees. But having grown up in the country and his love for the environment moved him to learn more about trees and how to treat them better.

"I just continued to educate myself and saw the need for quality tree care, plant health care, landscaping," he said.

These lessons are things he tries to pass on to others, whether it's to clients or people he comes across through volunteering.

While he knows that volunteering might generate some business, Kerns said he does it because of the feeling he gets.

"It does help to generate a lot of business," he said. "But that's not the whole reason. ... I do like to give back to the community and I do like helping people who are less fortunate than myself."

Although grateful for the recognition, Kerns said his achievements are possible through his workers and wife, who is responsible for the company's Make a Wish program.

"Definitely Susan, my wife, is a motivator in that," he said. "I'd be lost without her."

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