

SMALL BUSINESS

Landscaping his way to the top

Versatility is designer's specialty

By JOAN VERDON
STAFF WRITER

Chris Cipriano turned a \$100 investment in a pair of shrub trimmers into a custom landscaping and pool installation business with annual revenue of more than \$1 million. And along the way, he's met dozens of North Jersey executives who've hired him to create grottos, ponds, waterfalls and private oases in their backyards.

One recent morning, Cipriano, 39, owner of Ramsey-based Cipriano Landscape Design, stopped by one of his installations to check on some plantings. He found the homeowner, Billy Temiz, founder of Sixth Avenue Electronics, happily swimming laps in his Cipriano-installed pool at 7 a.m.

"It's so nice when you get to do these projects and you hear from the client that now they don't want to leave their home," Cipriano says.

"I think that's the biggest reward I get as a designer."

"He's unbelievable," says satisfied client Temiz. "He can build anything."

Cipriano Landscape Design has carved out a niche among North Jersey's luxury-home owners for landscaping projects that combine plantings and rock formations with pools, hot tubs and outdoor kitchens.

"One of the reasons why we went with his company was he does everything – from the landscaping, to the lighting, to the sprinklers," says Brigid Scannell, a Bergen County homeowner who had a landscaped pool and waterfall installed this year.

"Nobody else that I talked to does



STAFF PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH LARA

"It's so nice when you get to do these projects and you hear from the client that now they don't want to leave their home," says Chris Cipriano, above, putting finishing touch on the landscaping of an Allendale home. "I think that's the biggest reward I get as a designer." Another view of his work, below left.

everything. And that was huge to us."

Cipriano got his start in the landscaping field as a 16-year-old student at Ramsey High School. He got a job working for a landscaping contractor, Steve Miller, who became one of his first mentors.

"The way he broke guys in was he would give them the worst possible job, and then if they survived he would keep them, and show them the ropes," Cipriano says. "My first week there, it was a 102-degree day and I had to pitchfork all the mulch for all the guys into wheelbarrows. I think they took the temperature inside the mulch and it was like 140 degrees, so I lost something like 20 pounds that day. I showed up the next day and we've been friends ever since."

Cipriano participated

in the cooperative work/study program in high school, a program used widely in North Jersey that allows teens to take classes in the morning and work in the afternoons.

He spent his afternoons in high school doing work for landscaping contractors. After high school, he dabbled in several jobs, including selling cars, until a friend urged him to start his own landscaping business.

He used his initial equipment purchase of a pair of shrub trimmers to make money to buy more landscaping equipment. Within a year or so he had five or six men working for him, and was doing subcontracting for major landscaping contractors.

He originally had a partner, a high school friend, who did tree trimming and tree work while Cipriano handled the landscaping end of the business. "But we were both very stubborn," he says, "so we decided it would be better if we remained friends [rather than remain in business together.] And we're still friends today."

Friendships Cipriano struck up in the 23 years since he took that first job moving mulch have proved beneficial. Miller allowed him to come to his job sites and watch projects being built.

"I was never much for reading things and learning but if I could watch something being built once, I could remember it for the rest of my life," he says. "So I would watch how they put patios together, and how they did the stone work, and that's how I learned."

Another chance encounter with a friend of a friend led him to be hired in 2000 for a \$2.5 million landscaping project for a luxury home. That job marked his arrival in the big leagues of luxury landscaping. The job involved landscaping a four-acre site, with complicated drainage problems.

"The drainage system alone cost half a million dollars to install," he says.

Another mentor he met along the way, Fred Pearson, is now the manager of the company's swimming pool division. Cipriano started designing and installing pools when he found it was easi-

Cipriano Landscape Design

Founded: 1989

Owner: Chris Cipriano

Specialty: High-end pool installations featuring natural elements.

Start-up costs: \$100 for a pair of shrub trimmers.

Annual revenue: More than \$1 million

Web site: plantnj.com

Employees: 30 full time, plus seasonal employees and summer interns.

Words of advice: "You have to reach out. If you don't reach out and ask questions and talk to people, you can't network. Don't be afraid to shake a hand."

er to do those installations himself, as part of a landscaping project, rather than have to coordinate schedules with outside pool contractors.

William Moore is the company's landscape architect, and Keith Steinhoff, a licensed ornamental horticulture specialist, is the company's general manager.

In 2004, the company bought a 10-acre farm in Mahwah and turned it into a nursery where the company grows ornamental plants for custom landscaping projects.

At the nursery, Cipriano Landscape also creates its trademarked product – "living boulders" – big rock formations that have plants growing on them, for a more natural look in large installations.

Cipriano Landscape also promotes its water and energy conservation measures. It selects drought resistant plants to conserve water, and creates shade zones that keep homes cooler and save energy.

Cipriano has created a charitable venture, the "Keeping It Green" Foundation that donates \$10,000 a year for scholarships for four Rutgers University landscape architecture and horticulture students.

Cipriano, who never attended college, says he wants to honor all of the talented landscapers and professionals that were his chief educators. And he says he owes his work ethic to his mother.

"My mother was a single mother for a long time, and I can remember as a kid all the hours she had to put in and all the work, and I think that work ethic really rubbed off," he says.

"I wasn't afraid to work hard. I think if you want something in life, you have to go out and get it."

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Don't pass your stress along to employees

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK – Sales are down, customers are paying late and vendors are all raising their prices. That's a combination likely to raise stress levels for most small-business owners – who in turn can pass on their anxiety and create a stressful atmosphere for employees.

Given the many problems in the economy that are affecting many small companies, it's probably impossible to avoid feeling uneasy about business. But an owner can take steps to be sure he or she isn't stressing out everyone else.

Some go along with being a good manager and leader, such as being sure there's open communication between the boss and the staff. And some of it comes down to personal stress management – not letting the tensions of running a business in any kind of climate make life harder for everyone.

Being aware that you're stressed and that you could be affecting employees negatively is perhaps the most important thing you can do.

"If we allow ourselves to live the stress that we're constantly under, it's going to get transmitted – it's counterproductive and it's unpleasant," said Betsy Rich, president of Strategic Video & Blue Horse Digital, video production companies based in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

She recalled what it was like working for bosses who created stress: "My business partner and I worked in the most God-awful place for many, many years and swore when we left there that we would never have that kind of environment in any place that we worked."

You don't have to be screaming for everyone to know you're anxious – your face, your body language or tone of voice can give you away. The fact is, most people don't know how they're coming across to others, so staffers may pick up on your bad mood even if you think you're hiding it.

So how do you know when you're stressing everyone out? If you're not in touch with how you react to stress, you might want to ask family members, friends, and yes, employees, about how you're doing. It helps if from your first

day as an employer you've had open lines of communication with your staff. If employees have felt they could come to you with problems and that you'd be receptive to what they had to say, good or bad, chances are they'll be able to approach you when your stress is becoming contagious.

You should probably consider doing things that'll reduce stress. Take some time off if possible, get some exercise, make sure you get enough sleep, do things that make you feel good.

And not everything is worth stressing over. Melissa Anthony, who owns AnthonyBarnum, an Austin, Texas-based public relations firm, noted that a certain amount of stress is a part of running a business. "It's like household bills, but on a much bigger scale," she said, adding that the key is "knowing when something's really on fire or you're just imagining a situation."

Anthony believes that not passing on stress is part of being a good manager.

"The great leaders that I know, they made a choice ... they're going to address each problem" as it occurs, she

Being aware that you're stressed and could be affecting employees may be the most important thing you can do.

said. That way, the chance of a major crisis – and major stress – is lessened.

And, Rich noted, there are going to be those days that are just disasters, start to finish.

"It's something that we live with every day, and I also have MS [multiple sclerosis], and today I'm dealing with feeling exceedingly crappy and I dropped my phone in the toilet the day before yesterday – it was horrific," she said.

Some bosses believe that a stressful atmosphere will keep workers motivated. That may indeed work for some employees, but many if not most others don't do so well when there's high anxiety in the workplace. Productivity can suffer, they may call in sick with stress-related ill-

nesses or just take mental health days to get away from the tension. The owner's greatest fear, that the work won't get done, actually ends up happening.

A good way to help manage everyone's stress levels is through ongoing open communication, which should include giving staffers updates on how the company is doing. Relaying this information will be more than a pressure valve – it will also help employees understand how they might help business improve.

Rich said her company has frequent meetings that the bosses strive to keep light, not angst-ridden, even as problems are dealt with.

Deborah Osgood, founder of BUZ-Gate.org, a small business portal, said she has "daily check-ins" with her staff.

"I sit down with each of my reports every day and monitor the temperature," she said.

And, on Friday afternoons, the staff reviews what went well during the week. That way, they don't spend the weekend stewing, and they don't come back in a bundle of nerves come Monday morning.

THE WEEK AHEAD

Tuesday

■ Affinity Federal Credit Union, "Coaching Workshop," 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., 315 Route 206 at Kohl's Shopping Center, Hillsborough. Free. Call Jim Borelli, 800-325-0808, ext. 7390; or e-mail jimbo@affinityfcu.com.

Wednesday

■ U.S. Small Business Administration and N.J. Association of Women Business Owners, "Start a Small Business," 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., 2 Gateway Center, 15th floor, Newark. Free. Call 973-507-9700, or e-mail wbcasst@njawbo.org.

Thursday

■ Ramapo chapter of LeTip, meeting, 7 to 8:30 a.m., VFW Hall, Pulis and Franklin avenues, Franklin Lakes. Speaker: graphic designer John Milligan. First-timers get free breakfast. Call 973-634-4909, or visit letip-ramapo.com

■ Business Referral Partnerships, meeting, 7:15 to 8:30 a.m., Matthew's Colonial Diner, 4 Franklin Turnpike, Waldwick. Featured speaker: Brian Katz from Foundation Title Co. Other attendees also will have an opportunity to describe their goods and services.

First-timers get free breakfast. Call Armando Nugnes, 201-247-4915; or e-mail armando@armandoscleaning.com.

Upcoming events:

■ Wexnet Businesswomen's Networking Group, meeting, 5:30 to 8 p.m., Aug. 5, Motorphoto & Portrait Studio, 582 Valley Road, Wayne. Cost: \$75. Visit wexnet.ws.

■ Defense Procurement Center, "Do Business With Federal and State Governments," 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Aug. 7, New Jersey Institute of Technology, 323 Martin Luther King Blvd., Newark.

Free. Call 973-596-3105.

■ Business Networking Group, meeting, 7 a.m., Aug. 5, Panera Bread in Paramus Place Mall (Kohl's), Route 4, Paramus. Free. Call Howard Adler, 201-639-0095.

■ North Jersey Business Network, meeting, noon, Aug. 6, The Restaurant, 160 Prospect Ave., Hackensack. Have an opportunity to describe your business. Cost: \$15. Call info@getagift.net.

■ Bergen County chapter, New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners, meeting, 8 a.m., Aug. 14, Panera

Bread in Paramus Place Mall (Kohl's), Route 4, Paramus. Cost: \$10 to \$15. Call 201-444-8773, ext. 4; or visit njawbobergen.org.

■ North Jersey Business Network, meeting, noon, Aug. 20, The Restaurant, 160 Prospect Ave., Hackensack. Attendees will have an opportunity to describe their businesses. Cost: \$15. Call Caryn Starr, 201-791-4694; or e-mail info@getagift.net.

Send information to: This Week, Business News, 150 River St., Hackensack, NJ 07601. E-mail lapidus@northjersey.com or fax 201-457-2505.