

FAMILY AFFAIR

Rich Arlington, CSP & CLP, and Crystal Arlington, CSP, are building their companies for the next generation



BY CHERYL HIGLEY
Managing Editor

Since helping to found Arlington Lawn-care 20 years ago, Rich Arlington III, CSP & CLP—with the help of his wife, Crystal Arlington, CSP—has transformed his one-truck operation in Erie, PA, into a multi-company success story.

Arlington means business, and he doesn't apologize for it. Yet if you've ever seen the Arlingtons at SIMA's annual Snow & Ice Symposium, you'd never know family sometimes takes a backseat. Their children Jennifer (age 17) and Ricky (age 10) are with them, growing up in the family business—learning at an early age the ins and outs of a business that Arlington hopes they will one day own.

“Our philosophy is simple. If we don't take care of the business, it won't be able to take care of us,” Arlington says. “Because Crystal and I work so much, we have raised the children in the business. They come to work with me, do estimates with me. We teach them how to set goals, create action plans and that you can achieve what you believe.”

A dynamic duo

They work together and live together, so how do Rich and Crystal Arlington remain on an even keel and keep business from getting personal?

Arguing is futile, Rich says, so why bother? The key, Arlington says, is he and Crystal are cut from the same cloth, and that's why they work so well together. They are both tenacious and good at managing people; the difference-maker, Arlington admits, is that Crystal understands the demands and sacrifices that must be made.

“She understands it and deals with it very well,” Arlington says. “She owns and runs AGMG and also works as my right hand in everything I do. There is a lot of truth to the adage that behind every successful man is a woman supporting his every move. I can honestly tell you that without Crystal, I would still be where I started.”

With the family's many businesses taking center stage, where does work end and family begin? Easy—at their front door.

“Home is our sanctuary—no work; it has to be

that way,” Arlington says. “We do run our home life like another business, so there is strategic planning, scheduling and operational meetings; but there are rules and consequences and everyone knows there are rewards if all goes well.”

Leaving a legacy

Jennifer and Ricky are still years away from working in a substantial capacity for the company, but their parents already have transition plans in place for when they decide to step away from the business. They have established a trust should the children desire to take over the company—with the condition that they work from the ground up, since “employees are not going to want to take orders from a 25-year-old who they watched grow up,” he says.

Arlington is adamant that the kids will not receive special treatment because of their last name. It's not fair to his employees, he says, and it doesn't serve the best interests of the business. Case in point? Jennifer got fired a few years ago while working on a crew.

“That was an unnerving situation,” Arlington explains. “The supervisor wanted to fire her but didn't know how, he didn't want to make me mad. But it was a business decision. And while it was a little rough, nobody learns by doing it right all the time. You can't buy experience—you have to get it on your own—even if you're the owner's kid.”

Jennifer is now a senior in high school and plans to study business management and advertising in college. She is taking an active role in the business, currently working as an intern with Arlington Lawn-

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UNDER THE ARLINGTON UMBRELLA

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- Affiliated Grounds Maintenance Group
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“Branching out beyond Arlington Lawncare was done out of necessity. Competition is fierce, so if you can create your own competition you are more likely to sell accounts. I also believe in having smaller profits from multiple sources. As each business has its ups and downs, this keeps cash flow stable,” says Rich Arlington.

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RICH ARLINGTON III

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care. She takes great pride in the family’s success and understands the importance of learning the ropes.

“I know my dad wants me to be strong and independent,” Jennifer says. “I want to be involved with this company because he has shown me its value and reputation. He works for us, lives for us and he motivates us. I want to work with him and learn from him. I want to follow him into the spotlight.”

Plan B?

Nothing would make Arlington happier than turning over the business he built from scratch to his children: “I would hope they would want it someday. Half of my life is here—I would die if I have to sell it,” Arlington says.

However, the reality is the kids are still young and anything can happen. Rich and Crystal are prepared for the possibility that the business might one day be owned by someone other than an Arlington. Should Jennifer or Ricky choose to go outside the family business, Arlington says he would opt for an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan).

“We have promoted from within so that we could retire today if we wanted,” Arlington says. “I have a full complement of management staff, many of whom helped me build this company. I would look to them to see if they would want to take ownership.”

His faith in his employees has allowed Arlington to scale back his work at Arlington Lawncare—he has turned over all operations to his management staff and now handles the finances and mentors his employees. That has allowed him to “come into the office at noon instead of 7 a.m. if I want!” and to focus on expanding his consulting business, which he started as a part-time venture in 2003.

“I always said I wanted to retire at 45. I’m 42 now, so we’ll see. I can’t imagine not working—it’s what I do. I think I’ll probably die in this office,” he says. “But having a strong management staff has enabled me to work on my business and not in it, which allows me to concentrate on building what I believe in,” Arlington explains. **SB**

Cheryl Higley is managing editor of Snow Business magazine. Contact her at chigley@questex.com.

QUICK HITS WITH RICH ARLINGTON, CSP

Rich Arlington, CSP & CLP, started Arlington Lawncare with his parents in 1987 with \$3,000, a 1971 Chevy ½-ton truck, a lawn mower, a weed eater and a broom/dustpan. After spending one season as a subcontractor and losing \$700 that the contractor wouldn't pay, he launched his snow operations in 1988. As Arlington Lawncare celebrates its 20th year in business, Arlington gives his take on the snow and ice management industry:

Q: How has the industry changed since you got started?

A: Price is decreasing as everything else is going up. There are more people doing it now who do not understand what it costs to run a company.

Q: What are the three biggest factors in running a successful snow & ice management business?

A: 1. Know your numbers. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need to learn.

2. Learn what equipment can do each job in the most efficient manner and use it.

3. Track everything. Learn from your mistakes. Watch job costing—it will make a huge difference in success or failure.

Q: What is the biggest challenge facing your company and how are you addressing it?

A: Recruitment—personnel who still want to work seem to be getting harder to find, including plowers who can work third shift. It seems everyone wants the job 9 to 5, but if you tell them “We start at midnight” they are not interested. So we are adding more subcontractors to help service accounts.

Q: What are the biggest challenges facing the professional snow and ice management industry?

A: 1. Uneducated customers. They know what they want but hire the cheapest plower and complain about the service. Then they think we're all the same.



2. Balancing servicing the customer for ice control to avoid a slip & fall lawsuit, while keeping within their budget. Budgets keep shrinking, but expectations keep going up.

3. Competition that truly does not understand what it takes to run a business.

Q: For a rookie coming into the business, what advice would you give them?

A: Join SIMA. Find a mentor. Don't reinvent the wheel—learn from someone who has already done it.