

Member Profile

Rooney Landscape, Inc. Rolling Meadows

*Landscape Maintenance — Commercial
Landscape Construction and Design —
Residential and Commercial*

by Meta Levin

All of his life, David Rooney, owner of Rooney Landscape, Inc., Rolling Meadows, wanted to work for himself. So it was no surprise that he jumped right in when he got the chance to buy his employers' landscape maintenance business right after graduating from high school. "I went after it full bore for a year and a half before I realized that I didn't know what I was doing," he says.

Rooney throttled back, taking a full-time job with a high-end commercial landscape contractor and keeping his own business going on the weekends. While there, he met Bill Parker, who took Rooney under his wing, teaching him, among other things, to "embrace the Hispanic culture," a lesson Rooney credits with his ability to develop relationships with some talented workers.

When he finally left, a few of those new colleagues came with him, including Carmen Chico, now Rooney's maintenance foreman. Rooney says Chico takes ownership of projects, working on each as if it were his own.

Another key employee, Nick Clark, has been with Rooney for five years. He oversees the construction operation, and he, too, takes a personal interest in each job, Rooney says. Jose Arroyo was hired in 1995 because of his expertise in hardscape work. At the time, Rooney had no experience in hardscapes, but he rented some tools and worked alongside his new employee. Arroyo, in turn, trained other employees.

In 1987, Rooney decided to go after some large commercial accounts. Within a short time, 80 percent of his business was commercial maintenance. Many of those he also secured as snowplowing accounts. A year later, he learned an important lesson when a new owner took over his largest account, bringing in a new property manager and ousting Rooney Landscape. "I lost a quarter of a million dollar maintenance contract in one afternoon," he says. "It was the worst day of my life."

Rooney regrouped and promised himself that he never again would be in that position. Changing his focus to residential landscape design and construction, he began building his business again, finding a void in the high-end residential market in his area. He soon learned that operating on your home turf can be an advantage. Rooney grew up in the area and many of his customers and potential customers knew his fami-

ly. He saw them around the community. "We just were awarded a big design contract," he says. "We were competing with a bigger contractor, but the customer sees me at church and knows me."

Intent on giving back to the community, he donates goods and services to two major charities: WINGS, which provides temporary housing for battered women, and PHD, a resource that, among other things, operates food pantries. Rooney also advertises in church bulletins, provides landscape maintenance for many area religious organizations, and donates to area fund-raising events.

It wasn't long before he needed more sophisticated work, so he began developing a group of landscape architects willing to work for him on an independent contractor basis. To this day, he does not have a full-time landscape architect on staff, relying instead on two independents who do most of the work for him.

Along the way, Rooney has learned a lot about running his business, and prides himself on the way he has organized it, creating specialty crews in each area. Rooney Landscape has four hardscape crews that only do installation of stonework, brick pavers and other hardscapes. In addition, his planting crews concentrate on installing drain tiles, bed preparation, planting, grading, seeding and sodding. "Every crew runs like its own little company," he says. "It gives all of the employees a sense of ownership."

Rooney joined ILCA in 1993 and says he has found it a valuable resource. He has sent crews to ILCA seminars and has taken advantage of training in business management. He reads every issue of *The Landscape Contractor* magazine, and takes his entire crew to Mid-Am annually.

"It's a great fraternity," he says. "At the end of the day, everyone is pushing toward the betterment of the industry." ❁