



Bright Young Man Returns

to Grow BIG
Business on
Hilton Head Island

Article by Stacey Studley Collins // Photography by Anne

Lee Edwards, one of Hilton Head Island's brightest young entrepreneurs, speaks of The Greenery's success and his hopes for the future. The old adage, "The more things change, the more they stay the same," resonates with Edwards, who today presides at the business his father began nearly four decades ago. He is now setting a fresh course for continued growth despite the turbulent economy.

His aspirations aren't about being the biggest, although The Greenery is already the largest landscaping firm in the South Carolina and one of the top 50 in the nation, due largely to expanding the company's territory north to Mount Pleasant, just beyond Charleston, and south to Richmond Hill on the far side of Savannah.

Edwards considers growth essential to keeping opportunities alive for the company's scores of employees. "We like to say that The Greenery is a growing tradition—growing careers, growing people and growing business," he said. Yet for all its changes, the company remains true to its roots. Its original location, for example, is the same as it was in 1972. The old Bethlehem Baptist

Church building (for which the Greenery received the Historical Preservation Award in 1974) still stands. Today, however, it houses a boutique filled with antiques and decorative items.

The same can be said for many of the company's dedicated employees. Alfred Simmons, the first person ever hired there, still works at The Greenery. Simmons' affable smile and towering presence is a welcome fixture. Only today, he, like all full-time employees at The Greenery, is a part owner through the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP).

"Implementing the ESOP accomplished several things," Edwards said. "It not only provided a way for my father to retire, but it gave our valued employees a real stake in our vision. It helps keep good people." The Greenery's low employee turnover rate is a matter of pride for Edwards, who doesn't believe in micro managing. "I believe you hire the best and let them do their job," he said.

For Edwards hiring people with the right skills comes naturally. He has performed virtually every Greenery task at one time or another. As a youth, during school breaks, he worked



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with the crews by day and held down a second job at various island eateries at night to earn extra money. He credits the experience with teaching him a lot about cultural differences and developing self-discipline.

Surprisingly, working in the family business wasn’t always what Edwards wanted. An avid sailor (he holds a 50 ton license and has raced to Bermuda and back), he spent time exploring the Caribbean after graduating from Tulane University. “My parents told me I was off the payroll, but that I’d always have a place to stay,” he smiled as he recounted the journey.

Armed with that assurance and a good bit of pluck, he and a friend purchased the “ugliest boat you ever saw” and lived aboard while restoring it. With the sale of the boat for a handsome profit, he continued to travel, living for a time in Guatemala where he taught English (and learned fluent Spanish).

But, it was when he moved to Colorado and took over the management of a landscaping business that he realized his passion and reconsidered his father’s offer to return. “My dad was at a point where he needed to bring someone on; but I wanted to gain a bit more experience, so I finished the summer and took an internship with a leading landscaping firm in the Washington, D.C. area to learn how larger operations functioned,” he said.

Once back home, Edwards wasted no time putting his experience to use. “He’s always been a self-starter,” said his father, who promptly put his son in charge of the company’s construction division. When the chance to expand into the Charleston market presented itself, Edwards was eager to tackle the challenge.

The Greenery of Charleston was formed, with Lee as president. He grew the operation into the largest firm of its kind in the area before returning again when his father retired. Despite the recent economic downturn, Edwards has still found ways to be successful through careful spending and a sharp business plan. “We were hit hard, like most others in the construction industry,” he said, “but in 2010 we posted a 10 percent gain and look to similar growth for this year.”

Now here to stay, Edwards discovered Becca Dupps who had grown up virtually next door when he was a boy in Sea Pines. “I had gone hunting with her brothers as a teenager, but she was younger, and our paths really didn’t cross until I returned,” he said.

Today Becca and Lee are married and raising three little girls, all under the age of four. That responsibility, coupled with

his business, has made Edwards keenly aware of the need to keep Hilton Head a vital, sustainable community, not just for his own family’s welfare but also for his employees.

When he learned that Mayor Peebles was forming a task force to study the island’s future, it sparked his interest. Although the task force was comprised of several older people whom Edwards knew and respected, he was dismayed that none were under age 55. “I knew they were going to be making recommendations on the direction our town should take in the next 25 years,” he said, “and I wanted to be a part of that.”

Edwards decided to gather some young professionals whom he knew across the community to discuss their concerns for the island’s future. To his dismay, he discovered that many were unaware of the gradual decline of tourism, commercial values, and business revenues. “It was obvious to me that we needed to do a better job of educating residents about the state of our island,” said Edwards.

So with the help of friends and acquaintances, Edwards formed HHI25. “We are hoping to live here for the next 25 years, so we decided to come up with some recommendations of our own to improve the economy and protect our quality of life.”

A position paper drafted by that group ultimately was included in the task force’s report. “Without Lee, HHI25 wouldn’t have come to pass,” said Peter Keber, a former Hargray advertising executive and business consultant. “Lee has a way of getting things done, and if he hadn’t led it, it would have fallen by the wayside.”

Today that grass roots initiative is turning its attention to informing more young people and getting them involved in the island’s future. “We have over 200 on our mailing list and we are revitalizing a Facebook page and setting an agenda for the year ahead,” said Keber.

Edwards encourages younger islanders throughout the area to get involved. “Many of the concerns faced by Hilton Head 20 years ago when development was rampant no longer apply,” he said. “We need to encourage quality redevelopment and augment our tourist-driven economy. In business, as in anything else, you can’t stay static. If you’re not dynamic, you aren’t going to be the best, and that’s what I want for my family, my company, and our island.” ②

For more information concerning HHI25, contact Keber at pkeber@hargray.com.