

FIVE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW BY SETH JONES | LM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Mike Prokopchak

**PRESIDENT, WALNUT HILL LANDSCAPE CO.
ANNAPOLIS, MD.**

1 What do you want to tell me about Walnut Hill Landscape Co.?

We're a high-end residential contractor. I started in the nursery business in high school in the summers and working weekends. Then I took drafting classes in high school and found out you could go to school for landscape architecture or landscape construction. I chose landscape architecture. I went to Temple University and then worked for several firms. I started the business in January 2006. We're very specific in that we're a landscape construction company. We do work with high-end builders.

2 What are some industry trends you're seeing in your area?

Similar to right after 9/11 ... 9/11 was one day and everybody hunkered down and spent money on their homes. COVID-19, when it first started, it was, "two weeks ... two more weeks ..." Now, here we are. People are doing the same thing. They're spending money on their houses. They want a pool. Summer kitchens are still hot. Everybody likes fire, so different elements of fire, whether it be a wood-burning fire pit, gas, a fireplace — all those elements are extremely popular. We're a little insulated being here in Annapolis, between D.C. and Baltimore. They don't make any more waterfront, so people are coming in, buying houses, tearing them down and building new. I don't want to say we're recession-proof, but we're doing OK.

3 What is something that has made your operation more efficient?

Our new facility is going to make us more efficient. Right now, our trucks are parked on top of each other. We're building a brand-new facility right down the street. Walnut Hill is a 1770s farmhouse, 650 acres originally. We're on 2.5 acres. It's my house, a detached garage with an office, our nursery and our trucks are parked in the back with a barn, basically on an acre. Our new site is 16.5 acres on the water, 4 of which will be for the landscape company and the nursery. We're excited to get going on that. We're getting our shop built now.

4 Is there a single day at work that stands out in your mind?

We were the contractor that renovated the Rose Garden at the White House. One morning, the (White House) chief usher calls me and says, 'Can you take a call at 8:30?' I said, 'Yeah.' 8:30 comes and goes, no call, I keep working. It's 11 and I'm driving into D.C. and he calls me back and says, 'Can you take a call from the first lady (Melania Trump)?' I said, 'Sure.' A minute later, she chimes in. She was in New Jersey and just wanted to tell me she was watching the project through her photographer and wished us luck on getting the job done. Getting to meet her and the president was incredible. It doesn't even matter what side of politics you're on, that's the people's house. I got to bring my kids to the grand opening party. The chief usher is there to greet us in the garden, coat and tie. He was with me the night before, working, covered in mud. Now he's just perfect. He looks at my kids, and he points to the Kennedy steps, which is where the president always does his press conferences in the Rose Garden. He says, 'Do you realize the first man to set foot on the moon was standing right here? And your dad has been working on this garden for the past two weeks.' And they both looked at me like, 'Wow.'

5 What's the best part of having your job?

I truly love what I do. The satisfaction of seeing a job at the beginning — a brand-new empty blank site or a renovation — seeing the job complete is very satisfying. My favorite part is when the job is over, it's a Friday night and the client is having a party on Saturday night, we're scrambling and I've got a hose and I'm washing everything down. I coil the hose up, put it away, shake the client's hand and say, 'Thank you.' That's gratifying. 



BEST ADVICE

"Training ... teach your guys the right way to do things. A couple years ago, I met Marty Grunder, and I immediately took a liking to him. He told me people come and go, but he taught me that training is a big part of what we do and you have to keep doing it."

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