

Business-minded tree man employed skills at early age

BY SARAH KINGSBURY • GALLATIN NEWS EXAMINER • NOVEMBER 3, 2010

As a young boy, Rick Decker enjoyed climbing trees, like many other children at that age. But unlike most children, Decker continued scaling limbs long into adulthood.



Rick and Donna Decker started Family's Tree Service nearly two decades ago. (SARAH KINGSBURY/Gallatin News Examiner)

JUST THE FACTS

Location: 1308 Old Highway 109 N.

Contact: 452-3994

Website: familystreeservice.com

How long in business: 19 years

Business type: Tree care service

Startup capital: About \$200

Inspiration: "Providing a safe, stable work environment for our six employees, while educating and meeting the needs of our clientele."

Role model: Rick's father, Richard Decker, and his brothers, Jeff and Tim Decker

Best lesson learned: "Baby steps. Don't bite off more than you can chew."

Rookie advice: "Don't get in over your head financially. Have integrity."

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His experience as an entrepreneur also started before he reached double digits. Decker and his two brothers were washing cars and windows to make extra cash when he was 8 years old. While living in a multi-story apartment complex, they would make "a pocket full of money" by going door-to-door offering to take residents' garbage down to the trash bins.

"We were always making money on our own," Decker said. "We didn't get any allowance, so if we wanted any spending money or to buy a toy, we pretty much had to go and make it."

After graduating high school, Decker began helping his brother with a landscaping business.

"If there was ever tree work, limbs to be removed, I always shimmied up there and did it," he said.

He gradually became more involved in the industry, working for a couple of other people before starting his own tree care business in Florida. He ran it for five years before moving to Nashville to try to be a songwriter. Along the way he married his wife and in 1991 they started Family's Tree Service.

"When we started we literally had zero clientele," he said. "Today we have tens of thousands of customers that we have served throughout the years."

Machines Ease Pain Of Labor-Intensive Jobs

The Deckers started out with an old pickup truck and a couple of broken chainsaws that they repaired. The couple didn't have much money, so expensive equipment was not an option. As a result, many tasks had to be done without the help of a machine.

"We did not have a chipper, we didn't have bucket trucks, we didn't have cranes," Decker said. "It was a time-consuming, intense labor operation, but that's how we started for the first couple years and then we just slowly advanced."

Recalling his first job makes Decker cringe. It was an experience he said he'd never forget. With just enough money at the time to get his business license and a tank of gas, he took whatever work he could find, and that happened to be the removal of two giant beech trees. He was paid \$1,000.

"My son and I worked on it a week straight, nonstop," he said. "Nowadays that job would cost thousand and thousands of dollars, and I wouldn't break sweat on it like I did back then."

And then, six years into the life of the business, Decker took a hard fall and was unable to continue climbing trees.

"I about killed myself, but it forced us to get our first bucket truck and then we began to grow," he said.

Time Off Scarce In Early Years

Now that the business has grown, the Deckers have been able to purchase equipment to make the work easier and more efficient. With six employees, the couple has reached a point in their lives where they can leave the business to take a vacation, though Donna still runs the office remotely via her computer.

But while leaving some challenges behind, they've picked up new ones.

"This might sound strange, but we get reward in knowing that we provide a safe, stable and healthy environment for six employees that are the breadwinners of their home," Decker said. "When you're a small business, it's a little different than corporations. They're like your kids — you feel very a part of them and obligated, and some nights you stay up and worry about them."

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