

Graduates of the business school of hard knocks

By Michael J. Solender

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One of the most inspiring aspects of running their own business, according to Darin and Heather Brockelbank, is the notion that decisions they make impact the livelihoods of so many other people.

“We had all our employees and their families over for a holiday party last year,” said Heather Brockelbank, “and there were over one hundred people there. It really hit me that our business impacted so many others in a positive way.”

If the Brockelbanks appear more mature than many couples their age – each is 28 – it may be because of the responsibilities they shoulder. The couple founded and are co-owners of Charlotte-based Metro Greenscape, a 35-employee, \$3 million revenue outdoor living firm that specializes in landscaping, outdoor kitchens and fireplaces, patios, pergolas and the like.

By the time he was 17 years old, Darin Brockelbank had already been in business for three years, enjoyed 75 clients and had close to \$180,000 in annual revenue.

A full-time high school student with a part-time job as a bagger at a local grocery, Brockelbank’s sideline lawn care business had grown so large that he was employing his high school pals and his soon-to-be wife, Heather, in servicing accounts.

Two years later the Brockelbanks married, gave up their business, sold the accounts and equipment and did some extensive traveling.

“Our initial plan was to travel the country with an eye towards researching small business successes, management systems and processes then returning to Charlotte to get a formal college education before going back into a business of our own,” said Darin Brockelbank.

- Here’s how to gain business knowledge from personal experiences:

Seek advice from a wide network: The Brockelbanks are big networkers. When they see small businesses that are successful, they make a point of interviewing the owners and even shadowing them at work to learn directly.

Confer with clients: Get referrals and take advantage of specific business expertise customers may have. Show an interest in clients personally, and they’ll do the same with you and your business.

Use industry and service associations as resources: Metro Greenscape just joined the Employers Association of Charlotte for classes on personnel management, labor laws and regulations. Industry associations offer specific trade information, and referrals.

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One year into their plan Heather was studying at Winthrop University, and Darin was enrolled at CPCC. He became frustrated early on thinking that much of what was being offered was education he already knew. With only one semester under his belt, Darin quit school and got back into the business he'd left behind a year earlier.

"We had a non-compete contract on lawn maintenance with our previous customer base," said Brockelbank, "So I looked at what other types of similar services I could provide and ended up doing hardscape work like fireplaces and patios."

By 2004, the business was taking off. Heather joined Darin, and they formed Metro Greenscape as an S-corporation upon advice of their attorney to avoid personal liability.

"We are not afraid to ask for advice," said Darin. "And some of the best advice comes from my customers. Many of them hold executive positions with large corporations or own their own business. I could have quite an advisory board with just a handful of my clients."

They began with three employees and \$150,000 first year revenue. Their exponential growth over the past decade has been through identifying unique market niches, providing superior customer service, building solid relationships with business partners and a great deal of trial and error.

A serious, two-year-long drought from lack of rain, combined with the sour economy, nearly bankrupted their business. Yet the Brockelbanks, with no formal business education or training, were determined to succeed.

Learning from mistakes

"We scaled way up with the building boom," said Heather, "And we were working as subcontractors initially to some large builders and prime contractors. We learned the hard way what lack of control meant. When the bottom fell out in 2008 we were often last in line to collect and ended up with some significant debt."



The Brockelbanks received counsel to go into bankruptcy, but decided against it as that decision went against their values. Instead, the Brockelbanks met with each of their own creditors, explained their situation, and worked out a payment plan that everyone could live with. In order to meet their obligations, they sold much of their equipment, scaled back on employees, forgave their debtors and over the next few years worked hard to pay off their debt.

Today they work exclusively as prime contractors, and are among the only licensed general contractors for their areas of expertise in both North and South Carolina. Many of their referrals come from those they used to work for – and whose debt they forgave.

Their accolades come not only in the way of satisfied customers, but through industry recognition such as Contractor of the Year from the National Association of Remodelers International (2010), Top 300 Small Businesses in the South East by Business Leader Magazine (2011 & 2021) and a finalist for coveted 2012 Landscaper of the Year Award by CASE Construction.

Lake Wylie, S.C.-homeowner Jennifer Spitzer was referred to Metro Greenscape by a friend who'd done business with them.

"I have a large project involving a swimming pool, retaining wall and outdoor kitchen," said Spitzer. "What has impressed me most about Metro Greenscape is their attention to detail and level of customer service. It is very refreshing to see them address things that aren't right before I even have the chance. I am very pleased."

This year is dedicated to enhancing systems and bringing more efficiency to the business, according to Heather.



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