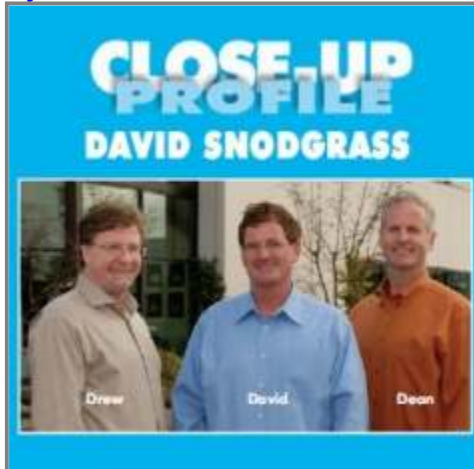


DAVID SNODGRASS

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By [EMILY KAPLAN](#)



DAVID SNODGRASS WAS HARDLY old enough to stay up late by the time he earned his first paycheck. As a third-generation employee in the family's landscape business, David started working at a very early age, weeding and watering plants. "My first paycheck was at five cents an hour," he recalls.

From those early beginnings, Snodgrass is now the CEO of an \$18 million-a-year company called Dennis' Seven Dees Landscaping & Garden Center, based in Portland, Oregon. The current company dates its origins to before David's parents even met.

Though the route was a bit circuitous, the family has been in the landscape business since 1927, when David's grandfather Bernard Esch started a one-man mowing company, to make ends meet during the Depression. He was working hard to support his wife Florence, who was launching a business growing rhododendrons.

Once that business was up and running, he dropped the mowing and focused on cultivating rhododendrons full time. Along the way, the couple had a daughter named Merle. Merle grew up and fell in love with Robert Snodgrass, who became her husband. Robert worked with his in-laws, eventually taking over the nursery operation. In 1956, he expanded into a retail garden center and landscaping.

David entered the picture some years later as the third youngest child of Merle and Robert's seven children, whose names all start with the letter 'D.' Their kids (in order, eldest to youngest) Daryle Linn, Dennis, Drake, Dan, David, Drew and Dean, became the namesakes for their father's company: Seven Dees.

Years later, oldest sons Dennis and Drake entered the family business and divided it into two separate companies. In 1977, David split off the landscape department from Dennis' 7 Dees, then partnered with younger brothers Drew and Dean. Only recently—in 2005—did David, Drew and Dean buy out Dennis' retail company and take over all management.

They must be doing something right, because the small-town rhododendron operation has now become a 210-employee company, with an extra 40 people seasonally. Dennis' Seven Dees now has

five garden centers and a large corporate office, and landscape construction and maintenance facility. They also boast two fourth-generation employees: Drew's son, John, 26, and Dean's son, Sean, 23.

David acknowledges that sometimes families can have trouble working together, but maintains that his family has found a balance. "Part of sibling rivalry can lead to entitlement, so it's a little bit different than if you didn't work with family members when you have positions and the authority that comes with them. Entitlement can become a challenge, because family members can operate outside of their role and their boundaries," he says. "We have successfully worked it out, because we communicate frequently and well, and we have positions that minimize crossover."

David serves as the company president, overseeing administration; Dean handles the production side of things, and Drew is one of the company's top design/build/ sales people. Adding even more family to the mix is David's wife, Pam, who operates a separate wholesale growing center.

David Snodgrass recently began a term as president of Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). He says he's learning excellent time management and delegation skills as a result of this office. He's making the most of his time on the board and expressing his excitement about the organization itself.

Eager to work on attainable goals like member benefits, Snodgrass is also keeping his eye on more overarching governmental and environmental issues that are taking up some of his time. "I think sustainability awareness and the importance of a green environment all started in the green industry. Sometimes people look at landscaping and say we're wasting water and contributing to pollution. It's time for us to claim it and say, "We are the original 'green' industry; there's nothing greener than what we do. Tell our story, and share all the facts that clearly support the positive impact that plants, grass and trees have on the environment."

"PLANET is well-positioned as the strongest voice of the green industry," he says. "The industry knows the strength of our organization, and now it's time to create public awareness about what PLANET represents and its mission to protect and grow the green industry. I think, going forward, that awareness is going to bring us a landslide of support."

As CEO of his company and president of PLANET, free time is a somewhat foreign concept to Snodgrass. When he does find a few spare moments, he likes to spend time doing outdoor activities, like snow skiing, walking in the woods and jogging on the beach. No matter how much is going on, Snodgrass always makes time for one thing in particular: vacation.

Every winter (usually January or February), for the last 35 years, he and his wife take four to six weeks to go somewhere warm and tropical. It may sound like a typical holiday in the sun, but these are no ordinary vacations. Snodgrass and his wife Pam don't make reservations; they get on a plane, head to a destination and see what happens.

They've explored places from Malaysia to Vietnam, staying with locals and sleeping on beaches along the way. Each trip is like a choose-your-own-ending adventure that depends entirely on those they encounter on their journeys. "You really survive by who you talk to," he says of his adventures. "I love exploring new places and being able to say, 'We knew this place then; look at it now.'" Because he doesn't make calls back to the office—he's only checked in four times in 35 years—Snodgrass says he's able to relax and recharge while he's there, and always is excited to get back to work upon his return. It is also very empowering to the staff knowing they must run the business.

Snodgrass tries to find the balance between work responsibilities and a commitment to his beloved industry, while still carving out time to explore far off places with his wife. So, what's his secret? "It's simple," he says. "I found something that I really enjoy. I always knew that this was what I wanted to do. The people in this industry are just so generous and genuine. And the work keeps me challenged every day."

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