



***Meet Tom, owner of Keep It Green 4 U lawn and garden maintenance.***

Tom Carlson is many things – business owner, master gardener, mentor, and formerly incarcerated individual. However, when you meet with Tom, it is obvious that at the top of the list, one stands alone – a changed man.



With the help of his business, Keep It Green 4 U, he was able to turn over a new page in life - or, perhaps more fittingly, a new leaf.

Tom had a string of crimes which led to spending time behind bars. "I was so stuck - drugs had a wrap on me - they had control of me." But, through the process, Tom made a decision to change and turn his life around.

"I was sitting in prison, looked in the mirror, and I didn't like what I saw. I didn't like what I saw because I was hurting people."

While incarcerated, Tom decided he wanted to start his own business working outdoors upon release. He drafted an initial business plan, obtained his Master Gardener credentials, and gained experience as lead gardener for Columbia River Correctional Institution.

After release, he pursued his entrepreneurial venture and sought out Mercy Corps Northwest for help, enrolling into the IDA matched savings grant program. "I invested everything into the business – I had nothing at the start." Tom bootstrapped his startup costs with some help from family, friends, and the savings he had, buying a truck and the necessary equipment. With that, there was nothing holding him back.

Tom started hustling – and things started happening. "I was handing out flyers like crazy. I passed out 1,000 flyers in one week. Going to 1,000 doors takes a long time." It worked – he started getting calls, and slowly built a group of repeat customers. But, it wasn't always easy.

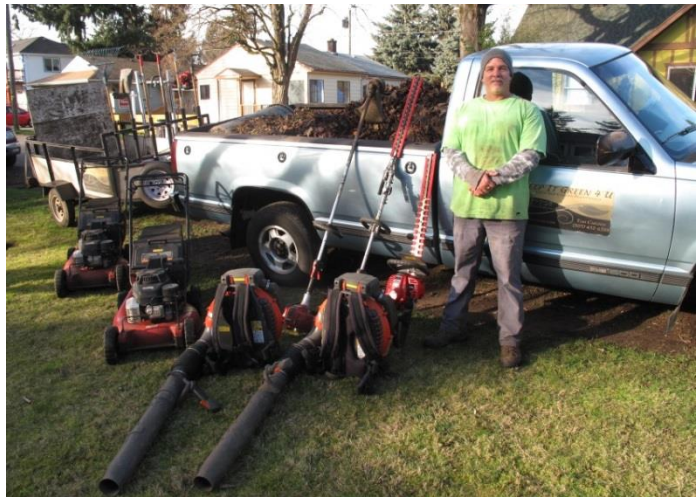


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"At times it was tough - I had to keep the faith it would work. MCNW was a big encouragement to keep going. I had to push really hard to save that \$75 each month. I kept saying to myself, 'Man, maybe I should have done \$50!' MCNW gave me something to look forward to, and something to strive towards. Not just for the money, but I knew there were people to help me gain the knowledge I needed to run my own business."

Nicole Thibodeau, a record keeping counselor at MCNW, was one of those people. "She helped me keep better records, stay on top of my organization, and make it manageable." Tom is also rebuilding his credit and paying down debts. He was always afraid of his credit before. "Now I'm in control."

Once Tom completed his training and hit his savings goal, he was ready to invest his IDA funds into his operations. With it, Tom bought additional lawn mowers, leaf blowers, trimmers, and backpack sprayers. "Man, it really makes my job so much easier."



As Tom grows his business, he'd like to hire staff and add a new truck and trailer. He says he will be back at MCNW to learn what the necessary steps are.

Through it all, it shows that Tom really loves what he does. "I like the variety of my job. I get a lot of great feedback from people, and they are happy with the work I do for them." His business is a big way he gives back, as well as mentoring others who have gone through the same story and situation.

"I figured out in my life that I can't think my way into new action - now I act to create new ways of thinking. Because of this, my life has gotten a lot better. In my past I was selfish. Today it's not that way. I've made a commitment to be of service to others now."

With this, he stops to reflect, and says with a smile, "I'm really happy and really proud of what I'm doing right now."