

Going Organic in Montgomery County

AOLCP Zack Kline Quietly Cuts Lawns and Testifies to Ban Lawn Pesticides

By Kathy Litchfield

Rockville, MD –

It was a “code red” day in Montgomery County, Md. – 100 degrees with intense humidity and very poor air quality -- and a teenage Zack Kline was sweating and breathing in smog as his ears drummed along with the loud noise of the string trimmer he utilized on a three-acre property.

Kline, who had always enjoyed his family chore of lawn mowing from age 11 on, started working for a small landscaping company the summer he graduated from high school.

What he didn't bargain for was the loud noise, excessive pollution and large amounts of gasoline the company poured into their machines on a daily basis. Days began at the gas station.

“I just knew there had to be a better way,” said the now 25-year-old NOFA Accredited Organic Land Care Professional, who founded his company, A.I.R. Lawn Care (A.I.R. stands for Atmosphere Improvement and Renewal) four years ago. Kline focuses on providing clients with natural and organic lawn care, landscape design and environmentally-friendly maintenance services. He found his clients wanted to be educated about alternatives to the loud, polluting engines used by landscape companies as much as he wanted to learn about and eliminate them from his life.

The enterprising young professional wrote a business plan and, in order to get seed money to start his own company, entered Salisbury University's Bernstein Business Plan competition in 2010, in which he took honorable mention. In 2011, after honing his plan, he re-entered again and took home the \$5,000 first place prize.

“With that, A.I.R. Lawn Care was born – I put a down payment on a truck, purchased electric lawn equipment and began to get clients for the 2011 season,” he said.

With his passion ignited, Kline launched into business and started going door to door with his electric equipment, offering lawn cutting. Over time his clients asked if he offered other environmentally friendly services, and he was happy to oblige. He presently has commercial and residential clients and maintains several crews. Last year he downsized the time-consuming residential side of the business and increased the commercial base; he was rewarded with triple growth of the business overall.

Networking has played an essential role in Kline's early success as well as in his connecting to the movers and shakers of Montgomery County, Md. where he is now embroiled in testifying to help ban lawn pesticides county-wide. Last fall, the co-founder of the group Bethesda Green and county councilor George Levantahl introduced a bill to ban “non-essential” pesticides from lawns throughout the county, citing cancer and other health concerns. Kline got involved with the group in 2011 at a lunch seminar where he met decision makers within the community's public and private sectors and formed lasting relationships that have not only led to referrals for his business, but allowed him to stand up and speak his mind not only about the hazards of pesticides but about the business opportunities for landscapers.

On Jan. 15, Kline testified at the bill's first public hearing, citing examples of successful local organic projects and the growth he has experienced in providing environmentally-friendly services.

“The results I've seen in my landscaping business show that lawns can be green and healthy at a reasonable cost while keeping people and pets healthy by avoiding the use of pesticides. I strongly recommend the county council to pass Bill 52-14 so our county can continue to set an example for other counties across the United States and be the safest, cleanest and healthiest community where people want to live and work,” he said during the hearing. A second hearing was held Feb. 12 and Kline said he has “no doubt” that the bill will pass.

He cites issues with the bill however: one is that the ban will exempt playing fields and parks where

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children play; and that there is a “sunset clause” that the bill will expire in 2019; issues that will hopefully be decided later this summer, he said.

Through his work, Kline has enjoyed getting to know Chip Osborne, who led a series of workshops in nearby Takoma Park, Md. to help educate the public about natural and organic lawn care last fall. Kline also maintains a relationship with Paul Tukey, author of “The Organic Lawn Care Manual,” who pointed him to the NOFA Organic Land Care Program for accreditation. Kline was accredited in 2014 at the Philadelphia, Pa. course. “I like to surround myself with experts,” said Kline. “People say, ‘it’s not what you know but who you know,’ but I believe it’s really ‘who knows you,’” said Kline, who attributes networking as a major key to his success. “I was very gung ho when I started out, always in the streets, introducing myself and letting people know about what I was doing, and becoming part of groups where I could meet influential people.”

Among these is the president of STIHL Inc. After extensive research into what battery-powered equipment he wanted to purchase for his company, Kline chose STIHL and discovered their president loved to play bagpipes. Kline purchased bagpipe cufflinks on the Internet, hand wrote a letter of introduction explaining his business plan and desire to purchase STIHL equipment, and sent it out. Shortly thereafter he received a personal phone call from company president Fred Whyte, who thanked him for the gift and arranged for a personal meeting with himself and other executives.

“After realizing I was the real deal, they donated equipment that helped get us started,” said Kline. Through other STIHL connections, Kline learned about PLANET, the professional landcare networking group for land care professionals, and STIHL’s Independent We Stand, a movement supporting locally owned businesses. Kline has been featured in industry magazines such as Turf Magazine and in national STIHL advertisements for battery-powered equipment. Kline’s roommate also runs a video production company, DC Visionaries, and is working on a documentary about the pesticide-banning bill.

“These relationships have tremendously bumped up my success. Just reaching out to the executives at Stihl for instance has grown my business ten-fold,” he said.

Using solar, battery-powered equipment has also provided Kline a niche in the ever-changing and growing landscape industry just outside of Washington, D.C., where he says people are progressive and business opportunities are plentiful.

“The biggest benefit is the noise reduction. The benefits to the business owner are huge – it’s very marketable, it saves money, there are no fuel or maintenance costs for the gas engines, they’re easy to start and operate and there is no pollution – my crews can talk on their cell phones while they’re out in the field,” he said. “And it’s clean for them, they’re not inhaling emissions. For the client, an additional benefit is that a client working remotely from home may be in the middle of a conference call when we show up to mow. The biggest compliment we get from our clients is ‘we didn’t even know you were here’ and then they see the finished cut and love the result. I believe battery-powered equipment will be mainstream within five years, because of these benefits.”

Kline has a practical and realistic view of the future. “The good thing is the grass is always going to grow and someone will have to cut it. It definitely affects property values. And people are becoming more and more conscientious about the environment. They’re looking at how contractors are handling that. We are setting examples that I believe others will start to follow.”

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