

BUSINESS

PORTER COUNTY UPDATE

March 2002

Story tip or comment? Call (219) 462-5151; or e-mail Porter County business page writer Dan Rafter at rafter@bigplanet.com

THE MARKETPLACE



Nancy Marshall and Becky Whitacer are sisters and owners of Small's Landscaping in Valparaiso.

Hard work the seeds of success

Welcome to *Big Enough to Succeed*, where once a month, the Porter County Community Business Page features a successful local independent business. This month, we look at the success story of Small's Landscaping in Valparaiso.

Nancy Marshall and Becky Whitacer have been to the homes of former Chicago White Sox stars Carlton Fisk and Ron Kittle. They've met with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and Fox news anchor Walter Jacobson.

They've even met Oprah. Despite these connections, Whitacer and Marshall aren't celebrities. The two sisters are landscapers, owners of Small's Landscaping, Inc. in Valparaiso. And they count the above stars among their more than 3,000 clients.

Of course, the sisters don't limit their landscaping talents to celebrities. They also might do the landscaping of your neighbor or the guy who lives down the street. These days, the sisters are doing quite well. But don't dare call them an overnight success story.

"It's been a long haul," Marshall said. "It's taken a lot of hard work to get where we are."

Valpo landscapers have worked for everyone from celebrities to the guy next door

Whitacer and Marshall prove once again that businesses don't have to be big or part of a national chain to succeed. But they also prove toughing it out is the real key to business success.

Though the sisters are a relatively new presence in Porter County, having moved their business to Valparaiso just last May, they are longtime veterans of the landscaping business. Their mother and father started a landscaping and garden center business more than 50 years ago. Gradually, the sisters took over the landscaping arm of the business, slowly but surely building up their client base.

But even though it's taken a lot of hard work, both Marshall and Whitacer say they'd choose no other business.

"This business is different every day," Whitacer said. "It's never the same. It's always a different challenge to make people proud of their homes when they drive up to them. When I first come up to a lot of houses, there's nothing there. But then when you leave at the end of

the job, it's all planted and pretty. That's really gratifying."

Small's Landscaping covers 12 acres of land in Valparaiso, land that is filled with home-grown bushes, trees and flowers waiting for the move to a client's yard. It's not a garden center, though, and is not open to the public. When opening their center, Marshall and Whitacer decided to concentrate only on the landscaping end of the business.

"If we were running a garden center, too, that would be too much to handle at once," Marshall said. "This way, we can keep our focus."

Whitacer and Marshall plan, design and install everything from gardens and retaining walls to massive ponds and streams for their clients. They often end up working with their customers for years at a time, adding bits and pieces to their gardens.

And the sisters don't just stick to Porter County. Marshall, for instance, has flown to a winery in California for four years, perfecting that

client's landscaping.

Each of the sisters has tackled several intriguing projects during their careers. But some do stand out. Whitacer remembers working on a home in Forest Beach Estates, an upper-end subdivision in New Buffalo. She landscaped this house so that not a stitch of grass showed. She installed a retaining wall and all manner of ground-cover plants, creating the illusion of a lawn where none existed.

Marshall once built a garden on a homeowner's garage roof in Chicago, where residents often have to create flower beds and lawns where they were never intended to be. Marshall filled the roof with unusual potted flowers, giving the homeowner an oasis in an urban environment.

She's also been working for the last two years on a project in Valparaiso, a project that required her to load massive slabs of New York blue stone to the home to create a large retaining wall. She's also created a pergola for the project, and is working on a 80-foot stream and pond.

"You really do get to be creative in this field," Whitacer said. "And that's the most enjoyable part of it."

For more information about Small's Landscaping, call the company at (219) 476-7400.