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MEMBER PROFILE

SOUTHVIEW DESIGN



Katie Mills Giorgio
Photos courtesy of Southview Design



COMPANY SNAPSHOT

Company Name: Southview Design

Owner: Chris Clifton

Date Company started: 1978

Location: St. Paul, MN

Number of Employees in Peak Season: 175

Areas Served: Twin Cities and Surrounding Area

Member Category: Hardscape Contractor, Irrigation Contractor, Landscape Contractor, Landscape Designer, Landscape Lighting, Landscape Management, Professional Gardening Services, and Snow Plowing

Website: <http://southviewdesign.com/>

For nearly three decades, Southview Design has been providing landscape design services to both residential clients and many area home builders. Working on projects that range from outdoor kitchens and fire features to garden layouts, outdoor lighting and retaining walls, their team-based approach to each landscape design project is at the foundation of their business model.

Since getting their start in 1978, Southview Design has completed more than 7,000 landscaping projects in the Twin Cities area and beyond. We talked with Chris Clifton, Owner and President, to find out more about how their business has grown over the years and to hear about the business philosophies that have made it possible.

Q. Chris, thank you for making time to talk with The Scoop. So tell us more about what you do at Southview Design and who you work with.

A. The company started primarily doing landscape projects for home builders back in the 70s. Gradually, we branched out into what I call pure residential design-build landscaping, so we started hiring landscape designers. Eventually we also got into the irrigation business. When I acquired the company in 2009, we grew the home builder business, grew the residential design-build business, and now in the last few years we've also started a maintenance division, which does high-end residential landscape maintenance and commercial maintenance.

Depending on how you look at home builders, specifically national home builders, you have to consider that you are working on a single family home but your client is a business and we've always gone back and forth on whether you consider that commercial or not. But I would say our design-build business is about 20 percent either commercial or home builder-related. The other 80 percent is residential design-build where we are dealing directly with homeowners.

Since getting their start in 1978, Southview Design has completed more than 7,000 landscaping projects in the Twin Cities area and beyond.

Q. What sets your business apart in the market?

A. We have invested a lot in marketing, so we have a very active marketing program that produces a fairly large number of project opportunities for us. Our business is also built on finding the best people and paying what it takes to get them on board and stay engaged. In terms of our philosophy, we focus more on the behaviors that we'd like to see in people rather than actual results and we have found that if you focus on the right behaviors then good results tend to follow.

Q. What are some of the values that Southview Design feels are important in doing business?

A. Our business philosophy really has three parts to it. First, we hire the right people. Second, we give them the right incentives, and third we provide the right environment for them, which includes culture and process and the general environment that they work in. As far as culture goes, that's one of those areas where we are focusing more on behaviors than results. I believe that culture should capture the good things that already exist; they shouldn't be aspirational. Many of what I would consider to be our core values are things that have been brewing here at Southview for a long time. I've just worked to enhance them. One of those is giving 100 percent effort. I was amazed when I got here by the effort and work ethic of our employees. Some of that is the company and some of that is just the industry in general, as this is an industry of very hard-working people. There is a certain confidence, a real can-do spirit that permeates the organization.

Q. How does your company approach customer service?

A. Another value which we see as a behavior is professionalism and I think that applies here. It's a behavior that is most



visible to the outside world and we think that is very important. We want people on board who exhibit professionalism as well as humility. The way we say it is, we take pride in our accomplishments without end zone celebrations. At Southview Design we also provide warranties, which are important to us. We have stated warranties but we generally will honor just about any warranty request even after the warranty is expired.

Q. Can you share any examples of innovative or creative business practices?

A. One thing we do on the design-build side of our business is we deliver the product in teams. So, the designer or architect takes the lead on the project as they play primarily a sales role and drive the creative process. But beyond that, we have a team of people helping them



...[W]e place value in their advocacy and their lobbying efforts

that specialize in various parts of the process. We have people that manage the construction process with them. We have people that do their measuring and drafting and get design ideas into our design software to provide estimates. We have administrative people who handle billing and accounts payable. We have people who order the materials. So our landscape designers have three, four or five people on their team doing something they specialize in. That approach raises the average competency level for any given task. In this industry, very often a designer has to do all of that themselves and it's very difficult to be good at all of those tasks. Now we have ten full-time landscape designers and architects and then another nine who work in support of them.

Q. How has being a member of MNLA helped you in running Southview Design?

A. First of all we place value in their advocacy and their lobbying efforts. Another benefit is the Leadership Institute which is a training program for high potential employees and we have been involved in that. Also Northern Green, which is a great event.

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