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HOME

DOUG LUNNEY

Big year for the snow-clearing biz

Humble beginnings snowballed into 14-man crew

BY DOUG LUNNEY, WINNIPEG SUN

FIRST POSTED: THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2014 05:21 PM CST | UPDATED: THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2014 05:24 PM CST



John Dick owns John Dick Landscaping and Snow Removal. He is enjoying all the snow this winter, and the business it brings him. (Chris Proca/lo/Winnipeg Sun/QMI Agency)

It was the first week of April in 1997 and the Winnipeg area had just been blitzed with almost 50 cm of snow and ice pellets.

A blizzard, which lasted more than 24 hours between April 6-7, led to Manitoba's Flood of the Century that spring.

Just two months earlier, John Dick and his wife Britt moved into their home in North Kildonan, which had a very long driveway.

"We hand-shovelled our driveway for the first time and I said 'that is the last time I am ever hand-shovelling that driveway,'" Dick recalled. "My wife didn't think it was necessary to buy a snowblower."

Despite Britt's initial response, Dick's entrepreneurial instincts took over. A lifelong Winnipegger, he shovelled neighbours' walks and driveways for spending money when he was a kid.

He bought the snowblower then went to a UPS store and printed off 200 flyers.

"I went door-to-door and introduced myself to my neighbours," he said. "I said 'my name is John Dick and I own a snowblower.'"

Britt, a hardy Manitoban from Swan River, joined her husband with shovel in hand. They each had other full-time jobs and worked 12-hour days, but once they got home they changed into their winter gear and earned extra income by walking around their neighbourhood behind their snowblower.

"My wife and I did it together and it just blossomed into (an expanded venture)," Dick said. "People were saying 'my sister lives across town and would like you to do her snow clearing as well.'"

"I'm not a guy to say no, so we bought a utility trailer and the rest is history."

Those humble beginnings led to Dick launching John Dick's Landscaping, which also offers residential and commercial snow clearing, and roof top snow removal. Dick has 14 full-time employees and 13 trucks.

I caught up with him Thursday morning as some of his crew were wrapping up overnight jobs, clearing commercial walkways and parking lots. Later in the day they were slated to tackle 195 residential homes.

"We got 14 full-time guys who rely on me for income and about 200 clients who rely on us for snow clearing, so it works out pretty well," said Dick, 43.

"Last year was a bumper crop as well. We had 172 cm last winter and we're definitely on track to break that. We'll probably have somewhere between 180 and 190 cm, which is more like what New Brunswick or Ottawa gets."

But there have been lean times as well.

"In 2011-12 I don't think we had even 60 cm in total," he said. "That's very tough to keep guys on the payroll full time."

Dick finds many Winnipeggers learn to embrace our winters by skating outdoors, snowmobiling or cross country skiing.

"Unfortunately there are people who complain all the time, whether it's too hot, too much rain or too many mosquitoes," he said. "But most people are happy and just dealing with it."

Not only have we had more snow than usual, we've also endured colder-than-normal temperatures, but there's away around that too, Dick said.

"There's a lot of military clothing that's available," he said. "I teach my guys to dress like cross-country skiers by using performance clothing -- Gore-Tex, polypropylene and wool on top.

"They dress in multiple layers, more layers of thin clothing rather than one layer of (heavy clothing). Guys who just wear a snowmobile suit, for example, that's the biggest mistake you can make.

"But when they wear multiple layers, eight or nine layers, then they don't have a problem with it."



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