



by Amy Materson



Andrew and Kathleen Dangelo

The Ohio Valley Group

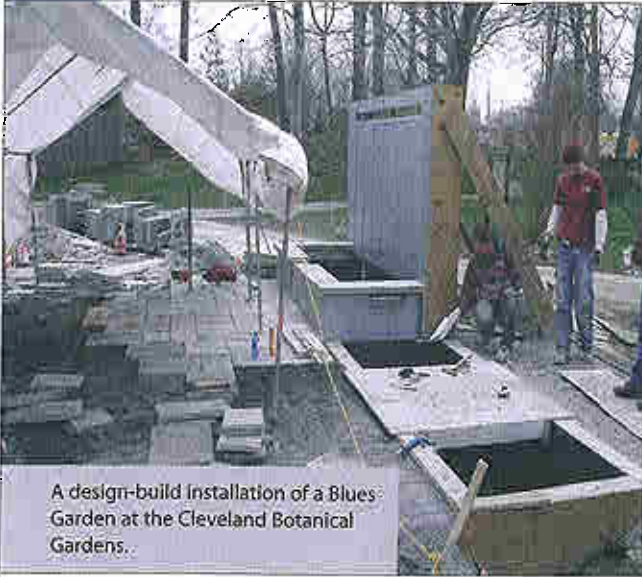
Chagrin Falls, Ohio

Andy Dangelo says he takes micromanagement to a new level. Even after owning The Ohio Valley Group for 20 years, he still likes to leave his personal touch on each project. His team members – they aren't called "employees" – like that he's a perfectionist. "He has principles and he's honest," says crew member Lynn Millen. "He's a gracious man to work for, and more than willing to teach." She says the attitude and attention to detail trickles from the top down.

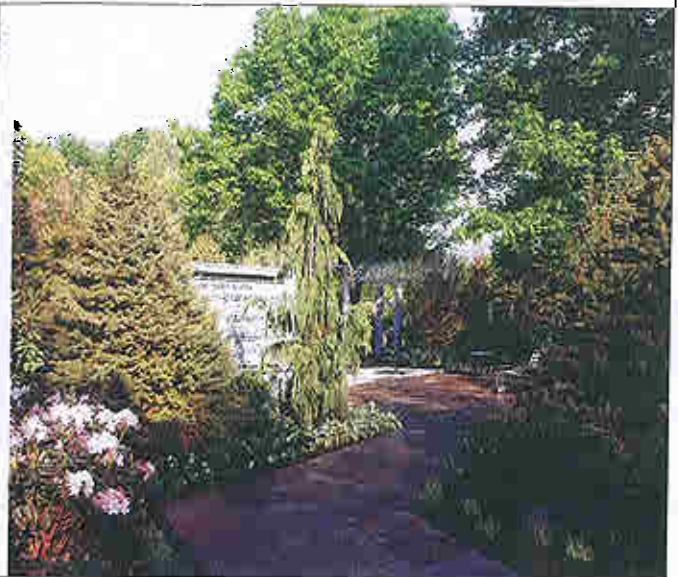
A graduate of Ohio State University's landscape design program and a certified arborist, Andy has grown The Ohio Valley Group from a venture started in the Dan-

gelos' spare bedroom to one of the area's only full-service landscape companies, offering design, build, irrigation, lighting, management, maintenance and tree care services. Andy's wife Kathleen is an attorney – a complementary fit for running the business. While involved in the business from the beginning, Kathleen has in recent years traded litigation for the day-to-day operations of The Ohio Valley Group, now located on 15 acres in the Bainbridge community. Her many responsibilities include marketing, equipment financing, human resources and contract writing. Kathleen pays attention to detail in her own way – every man hour is attributed to a specific job.

landscaper of the year finalist



A design-build installation of a Blues Garden at the Cleveland Botanical Gardens.



The team approach

Although countless firms use different methods to ensure their staff feels like part of a team, the Dangelos have made it a philosophy. Their management style includes an open book approach – the team members know how the company is performing financially, as well as how they can make an impact on the bottom line. The Ohio Valley Group has a points-based profit sharing plan each of their 45 team members participate in. Every person receives a share of the profits based on their points share, which is determined by factors including years of service. Kathleen says this enables them to feel invested in the firm's success. "Each employee knows exactly how they can impact their share by saving gasoline or minimizing repairs, for example," she says. "It underscores our 'everyone wins or loses' philosophy." They offer a competitive salary and good benefits – medical, dental and a 4-percent match on 401k – and at times have brought in financial planners to assist their team members with saving and investing.

The Dangelos want everyone to see their position as a profession, rather than just a job. To that end, they keep team members on the same crews rather than rotating them, enabling them to develop expertise in a particular area, while producing the added benefit of having a stable crew for their repeat clients. "Customers like to see the same people every time," Andy says.

Team-building events are also the norm. Monthly cook-outs, employee-of-the-month programs and team kick-off

days are a few of the ways the Dangelos foster a sense of unity among their staff. The company also holds a weekly "safety bingo" program – any accident-free employee can participate. When they reach "bingo," the winner receives \$200 cash. The program works well; Ohio Valley has an excellent record and has won several Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) safety awards.

Steady growth

Although you can look at the company's growth chart for proof of measured, calculated success, Kathleen says the first few years were difficult. "It's hard to get the proper systems in place, and it's hard to find the right team members," she said. "We made \$6,000 the first year." After reaching \$1 million in revenue in 2000, the company was poised for continued growth. "Once you get to a certain level, it's much easier to build upon it," she says. The company reached the \$3 million mark in 2008.

The Ohio Valley Group now experiences between 15-percent and 30-percent growth annually, a number realized from a combination of factors, including their mix of services. Condominium and property maintenance made up just under 30 percent of their sales for 2008, with hardscaping at 22 percent and landscaping at 15 percent. Since Ohio Valley caters to a high-end clientele, maintenance is a big part of the company's offering. To simplify things for their clients, some of whom have specific height requirements for individual shrubs, they've developed a "menu of services,"

a convenient checklist that allows the client to select the exact services they want.

Although the company works in a 100-mile radius, the bulk is in their own community – about a 30-mile radius. Their success has prompted the Dangelos to give back, and they work on a variety of projects in the area. Service commitments for 2008 included developing a master plan for Magnolia Clubhouse, a nonprofit that helps people with mental illness; performing landscaping and tree work for Valley Art Center in Chagrin Falls and sponsorship of an event that supports the Shaker Heights Historical Society.

Lessons learned

Andy says he chose to work with a specific type of client early in his career; a decision that ensured his eventual success. "I felt I should work with clients who want the highest quality possible," he says. "There was never a time I thought we weren't going to make it." As a result, The Ohio Valley Group is in the position where the Dangelos can pick and choose the projects they'd like to work on. Landscape architect Terry Ries, an Ohio Valley staff member since 2005, says the company has a loyal clientele with repeat business.

Andy recommends all potential clients pay a visit to the company's office, which has several installations designed to fire a customer's imagination. "Things have changed," he says. "Clients need to come and see what today's landscaping is all about." **TLC**



(Left) The Ohio Valley Group prefers to "get involved at the beginning," as with this project in Solon, Ohio, that was 3½ years from concept to completion. (Below) A residence in Russell, Ohio, includes a pergola and water feature.

