

SHINY AND NEW



Homegrown Berman Corp. Keeps Lake Nona Sparkling

► BY TERRY GODBEY

Marty Berman goes to the office every day determined to work harder than everyone else, and Lake Nona's striking architecture, high-end landscaping and iconic public artwork reflect that conviction.

The founder, chairman and CEO of Berman Corp., the national facilities management company that cares for nearly every business within Lake Nona's 17 square miles, formed his strong work ethic in his first job, as a firefighter in Mount Laurel, New Jersey. "I went to them as a 19-year-old who didn't know how the real world worked," he said. "The firefighters taught me to constantly try to be better, to train and to learn."

Seven years later, he decided to try something new. "I wanted to learn how to build houses," he said. "And I thought, 'If I fail, I'll come back to firefighting.'"

In 2005, luxury home builder Toll Brothers hired him as a construction manager and moved him to Orlando to join Landstar Homes, which it had acquired. A year later, in the early days of the housing collapse that preceded the Great Recession in 2008, Berman was told he had to lay off his entire staff — and that he, too, would soon be out of a job because no one was buying houses.

But first, Toll Brothers asked him to find a landscaper, a cleaning company and a pool company. "We had to maintain all these empty houses," he said. Berman sensed an opportunity, and he seized it. "I said, 'Look, I can do this, and I'll do it cheaper, better and faster.'" So he gathered the construction workers he had laid off, bought liability insurance and took over the building maintenance and landscaping tasks.

"I was the cleaner and another guy cut the grass," he said. "Then, about nine months into it, I started getting calls from other builders and began to realize that the model of providing more than one service really worked. I decided to go all in because it didn't look like I was ever going back to work in the construction field." So in 2006, he formed his company, then based in downtown Orlando, by maxing out his credit cards. "I had no money."



Autonomous Lawn Mower

But he had something equally valuable: diligence and a desire to excel. "We were cleaning to survive, and we outperformed everybody." With the recession kicking in, commercial construction in Orlando had nearly ground to a halt, he said, with one notable exception: the Sanford Burnham Medical Research Institute, which opened in Lake Nona's burgeoning Medical City in 2009. Berman Corp. won the contract to clean the building, which is now the UCF Lake Nona Cancer Center.

"That gave us instant credibility when we really shouldn't have had any," Berman said with a laugh. "We were the only facilities management company working out here. There were mostly cows and farms and agriculture, but we knew that in 10 years, Lake Nona would be a city within a city, so we staked our claim."

The properties Berman Corp. maintained "looked better than everyone else's," he said, so Lake Nona's developer, Tavistock Development Co., approached him with its vision. "They told me they wanted a uniform, high-quality appearance throughout their model city, and they wanted only the best." Berman Corp. got the job and started by cleaning Tavistock properties. Eventually the company became the overall property manager, handling all the property and maintenance needs of nearly every commercial building and many common areas throughout the community.

In addition to property and landscape maintenance and janitorial services, the full-service company has grown to handle 24-hour repairs and disaster response, pressure washing and events staffing.

Everything about Lake Nona, including the community's emphasis on wellness and excellence, appeals to Berman. "We had clients around the nation, but most simply wanted to maintain their property, not to be great. We

want to be a world-class company, so Lake Nona is a perfect fit."

The community's dedication to innovation and technology is another huge plus. Tavistock challenged Berman to be innovative, so the company has introduced autonomous floor cleaners and lawn mowers.

"While Laureate Park residents sleep, the lawn mowers, which are silent, are cutting the grass without them knowing it," he said. His employees also maintain the autonomous vehicles that transport residents to shops, restaurants, and recreational and medical destinations.

His company installed the community's public art and maintains it, too. Each piece is cleaned by hand every day, including the Glass House, an installation that resembles stained glass near Canvas Restaurant & Market, and Disco, a 35-foot-tall stainless steel sculpture of a Labrador retriever near Lake Nona Town Center.

Berman admires the community and its "smart growth" so much that in 2015 he moved the company there, along with his wife, Nicole, and their three kids. "Children here can go to elementary school all the way through medical school without leaving the area," he said, referring to the University of Central Florida College of Medicine. "We wanted to be in a place where we could live, work and play without driving 45 minutes." ■

