

# Student Career Days: The Student Becomes the Master... and a Sponsor

**Ahlum & Arbor Tree Preservation sponsors Student Career Days partly to help show there's more to the industry than dragging brush and running a chain saw**

By Tamsin Venn

**A**hlum & Arbor Tree Preservation, a 35-year TCIA member company based in Columbus, Ohio, will sponsor the Tree Care Industry Association Foundation's Student Career Days (SCD) for the first time this November during the TCI EXPO in Pittsburgh. For Chris Ahlum, the role couldn't be more fitting.

A graduate himself of SCD back in 2003 and 2004, Chris is now vice-president of the company his father, David R. Ahlum, founded in 1978. Chris, a TCIA Certified Treecare Safety Professional (CTSP), oversees operations management, safety programs and client services for this full-service tree care company.

TCIAF's Student Career Days is the student component of TCI EXPO. Open to students enrolled in arboriculture, horticulture, forestry and related programs at all levels, this annual event is the largest free career development event for students in the industry. Students have the opportunity to network with potential employers at a student-only job fair and compete against their peers in arboricultural knowledge and skills as well as a climbing competition.

To say his participation in SCD set Chris on his career path would be stretching the truth, but it certainly helped, according to Ahlum.



*Chris Ahlum taking part in a climbing competition during college.*

"The program way back then was a climbing competition that also involved a safety quiz. Over the years they have added a lot more, which is good," says Ahlum. The industry is a lot more than who can climb the tree the fastest, he notes.

"From an employer's standpoint, for an employee who is going to be with you long term, you want someone with the knowledge and skill set and someone who understands the safety aspects, more than someone who says, 'Hey, I can climb up this limb really fast, and I may fall off, but, oh well.'"

Employers also want someone who can identify plant diseases and insect infestation, diagnostics for tree health. "That's important as well," he notes.

Ahlum & Arbor serves both residential and commercial clients in Central Ohio. The company's bread and butter has been fine tree pruning and removals.

"In the past five to six years, the trend has gone to tree removal, due to emerald ash borer. So we're excited it is going the other way and back to more fine pruning. It's hard to compete with the guy with a chain saw and a truck," says Ahlum.

Ahlum graduated from Ohio State University in 2004 (his father is a fellow alum), majoring in landscape horticulture,

which is when he competed in SCD. That was partly because tree climbing competition was in his blood. His father used to run the Ohio tree climbing competitions and won the competition in 1981. Ahlum's motivation to sponsor SCD goes beyond family tradition and a strong desire to give back, however.

"We need to get the students and the younger people more involved. You hear all about the schools and forestry programs closing down. We need that up-and-coming generation. It's great TCIA is doing this, but I wish more organizations would put in more effort.

"We have to show younger people that it's more than a minimum-wage job. It's not just a skill you learn on the job, as in, 'I've got nothing else to do, I'll just go climb trees.' We need to show that you can make a career out of this, especially with students who go through college programs. It's much more than dragging brush and running a chain saw.

"The generation coming through isn't as motivated to work. We laugh about it, but it's so true. There's a difference in expectations. I get a lot of requests from applicants who want to be managers and foremen



*Chris Ahlum*



*Chris Ahlum on the job pruning.*

making \$30 an hour, but they've never done the actual work. So it's also a matter of giving them realistic expectations," says Ahlum.

Another thing tree care companies can do to attract younger workers is to embrace the technology more, says Ahlum. "There is so much more out there. Companies who change with the times will attract that younger generation as well."

Ahlum & Arbor bought an articulated crane a few years ago. And one of Ahlum's goals is to go paperless, so work orders for the company's 30 employees are electronic by way of iPhones and iPads. Use of the multiple tree work apps now available is another goal, so they can cross-check information for tree ID and insects, for example.

Ahlum teaches an arboriculture class at Columbus State Community College, and is an adjunct faculty member in the landscape program.

"A lot of the horticulture programs don't offer arboriculture. So hort students are thinking turf and landscape. Part of it is getting in front of them, to let them know



The Ahlum & Arbor Tree Preservation crew on Arbor Day 2015.

there's a whole other field to get involved in," says Ahlum.

Internships are also useful. It's a good way for students to try out an employer and the field and maybe change their focus.

"They thought they wanted to climb trees, but they really like the bug side, so it gives them a sense of what they want to do when they get out of school. For the employer, it's a way to check out future employees, to be able to find the right

ones," says Ahlum, whose company offers summer internships.

"Not having the qualified employees is a limit to company growth. Everyone I talk to, including TCIAF peer groups, says the worst problem is finding good employees who want to work and be here," says Ahlum.

He notes that the business is going well, with one of their best years, but with a few

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more employees it could be doing better.

While SCD certainly helped develop his interest in going into the arboriculture field and seeing the possibilities, Ahlum already had a head start. He worked in the family business throughout middle and high school and joined Ahlum & Arbor full time in 2002. In fact, the only other job he ever had was working at Subway delivering pizzas and subs during college.

Ahlum is one of only three individuals in the state of Ohio to hold both ISA's Board Certified Master Arborist and the American Society of Consulting Arborists' (ASCA) Registered Consulting Arborist #465 credentials; he is also one of the

youngest individuals to have earned either designation.

"This is what I know. I just have more experience because I've been there longer in the industry," he says.

But for those who may not have grown up attending tree climbing competitions and selling soda pop out of a cooler, "I think that SCD helps students get more involved. We all live in our little bubble wherever we are. I love the TCI EXPO, and it's invaluable for students to see that there's a bigger world out there than wherever they're from, and realize this is a big industry and there are a lot of neat places they can go to and things they can do."

*At right, Dave Ahlum with young Chris a few years back.*

