

'Weather is the biggest problem; Mother Nature runs my business'

Name: Daniel Egan

Background: Egan, 28, studied business and music in college and worked in construction. He started his own landscaping business seven years ago. This led to installing brick paving, and eventually he dropped the landscaping part of the business, which he now co-owns with his partner, Lee Durso. Egan and his wife live in the northern suburbs.

Years as a brick paving installer: 5

CONCRETE PAVING BRICKS, or "pavers," may look like the clay bricks a house is made of, but they're not the same. They can take much greater stress than the clay bricks.

We use pavers for driveways, sidewalks, patios, steps or stoops because they are not brittle and can take the weight of a compacting machine, which gives the finished product a perfectly flat surface.

My job involves selling and organizing the business and installing the pavers. In my first contact with a customer I go out to the house, see what he wants done, show him samples of the materials and, sometimes, make suggestions. Then I give him an estimate of what it will cost. I show him pictures of other work we've done and give him a list of references.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, potential customers want to investigate our work and how our company operates. Very few people say yes right away when we go out on a cold call. If they're serious, and they're already familiar with prices, we usually get an answer within a couple of days. When it's a referral, and they already know our work, it can be even quicker.

When a customer says he wants us to do the work, we have him sign a contract and give us a deposit. That puts him on the schedule, and we immediately start calling all the necessary JULIE (joint utility locating information for excavators) companies. They come out and mark the area for us. They check for gas, telephone, cable and water lines—everything they cover. So we know when we come out that we're not going to dig into the lawn and cause a problem. We always take that precaution before we start a job.

On the first day, we show up with a three- or four-man crew and do a full excavation of the area where we

will be working. We clean up all debris, concrete, grass—whatever is there—and haul it off the site. We cover the whole area with a plastic that's a vapor barrier to keep the ground dry. We don't want the ground to be saturated when we start installing the stones, which is the next step.

The next day we pull off the plastic, which we use every night until the pavers are installed, and put down four to six inches of stone or gravel and compact it with a vibrating machine. Then we install the sand, which is all screened or leveled. That's how we get the base to lay the pavers on, so everything comes out perfectly level.

After that, the bricks are installed, and the compactor is run over the top of it. That's what compresses the bricks down into the sand and makes the surface totally flat.

The square footage and the design determine how long it will take to install. A 500- or 600-square-foot driveway will take about four days to complete. I have three brick crews working most of the time.

A typical day for me is pretty busy. First off, I come to the office at 6 a.m. to get the paperwork ready. Then I meet my crews at the shop at 7 and tell everybody where they're going and what they're doing.

I go to one job with a crew and get them started, and then to another job with the next crew and get them started. I have to make sure that everyone has the proper materials and that they know what they're doing. I dig with the crews, which is very vigorous work because it's hand-digging. We don't want to ruin any landscaping and have to replace it. Patios and sidewalks have to be excavated to a total depth of nine inches.

After everyone is set, I go back to the office and organize the delivery of the bricks. Sometimes we pick them up, and sometimes they're delivered directly to the job. After that I go back



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY MICHAEL BUDRYS

"I found a Bowman milk bottle from the early 1900s. . . . I save all the interesting things I find."

out and check on everyone again.

Quality control is my responsibility. I have to keep going from job to job and checking. We recently ran into a situation where the bricks went in nicely but two of them didn't fit just right. The customer wasn't happy with it. The next morning I went back myself and took those bricks out and did them over.

In between, I have to find time to pay the bills, answer the phones and see potential customers. I run all this myself because my partner works full time with one of the crews. It gets very crazy. I find myself pulling my hair out sometimes.

I sell in the evening and on Saturdays. It's typical for me to work 15 or 16 hours a day. I often work all day Saturday. And if the only day that someone can meet me is on a Sunday, I'll fit it in. I usually spend three or

four hours in the office on Sunday too.

There are some surprises in this business. Some are unpleasant—like finding out that someone has run his gas line for the gas grill under the patio, and we didn't know it was there. The gas company knows us by now because of all the times we've had to call them.

We find other surprises too—like old concrete under grass. Recently I found a Bowman milk bottle from the early 1900s. Just imagine: some guy was digging here, drank some milk, threw the bottle down and it got buried right where I was digging. We find lots of interesting marbles too. I save all the interesting things I find.

Weather is the biggest problem. Mother Nature runs my business. If it's sunny, we'll install every single day. If it's raining, we stop for a while. We just play the game and try to install as much as we can.

What I like best is seeing a customer's face when he or she is really pleased with what we've done. Taking nothing and creating something beautiful from it is so gratifying. ■

Interview by Norma Libman