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Local

Christy Webber's gay Garden of Eden

By Matt Alderton

STAFF WRITER

Although she's lived in Chicago since 1983, Christy Webber is no city mouse. Born 88 miles northwest of Detroit in Montrose, Mich.—population 1,480—she was born a country mouse, and a country mouse is what she says she'll always be.

That's why she started her business, Christy Webber Landscapes, in 1988: If she had to work, she decided, she wanted to work outside.

Webber started her business with just two employees and a lawnmower in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood. Today, Christy Webber Landscapes is one of the largest landscaping companies in Chicago, with approximately 250 employees, \$20 million in gross annual sales and an all-star client list that includes the United Center, Midway and O'Hare Airports, McCormick Place, Navy Pier, the Museum of Science and Industry and Chicago's own Garden of Eden: Millennium Park.

Although she's grown it in spades like a fresh-cut summer lawn, Webber doesn't take her success for granted. Instead, she tends her business like her green-thumb clients tend their gardens: carefully and constantly. To find out how she's sown her seeds, CFP recently spoke with Webber about being an out business owner, woman and philanthropist.

CFP: How, exactly, did you get your start in the landscaping business?

Webber: I was in the country when I was a kid, but I moved away from that little small town because I was gay. I moved to Denver to go to college because I had a basketball scholarship—I had all those good dyke things going on—and wanted to be a gym teacher. I mean, I'm a lesbian; I was a big jock and I just said, "What else am I going to do but be a gym teacher?" I went and got a degree and I started teaching and I didn't like it. I tried to coach here in Chicago at an all-girls Catholic school, and that didn't work out, either. I'd started cutting grass during college because I liked being outdoors. So when I moved back to Chicago and found out I didn't like teaching, I said, "Look, why don't I just cut grass again?" That was in 1988.

CFP: It sounds like a happy accident that you became a business owner. How did you get from point A—cutting grass—to point B: owning one of Chicago's largest and most prominent landscaping companies?

Webber: I can't say I woke up one morning and said, "I'm going to be an entrepreneur." I had no business background; I just worked hard and saved my money. A lot of it's been "right place, right time." It's been about doing a lot of hard work and hiring

good people to help me along the way.

CFP: It's hard work that built your business. What's sustained it, however, during these hard times?

Webber: Well, we do a lot of municipal work for the City of Chicago, and we still do a lot of residential work. We have a real diverse portfolio of work, and that's what's kept us strong during this economy. Also, we have a very diverse workforce; we're one of the only landscapers that have a fair mix of gay and straight people, Latinos and African-Americans, and men and women. Traditionally, white guys run it and Mexicans do it. We've got other people in the mix, thank goodness, and I think that's helped us.

I've been 20 years in this business now. I'm not a serial entrepreneur. When I hear about other entrepreneurs, they've got their fingers in a lot of different businesses. I don't. I'm just stuck in this one. Lately, though, I've diversified my business model a little bit—mostly just to make sure the mother ship is stronger. I've acquired a materials business, I acquired a little garden center out here on the West Side a couple years ago and I'm looking to possibly expand into some other markets where there are sporting teams. Because we work for the United Center and we work for Soldier Field, we think it would be kind of cool to be in Milwaukee and St. Louis. That might be the next step for us, expanding into different markets.

CFP: Twenty years is a long time to be in business. During that time, what's the biggest lesson you've learned?

Webber: I didn't understand when people said, "You should have a really good relationship with a bank." I thought, "I don't really give a shit about a bank." Generally, men run banks and they didn't want to talk to me anyway. They just didn't take me that seriously. Because of that, I paid cash for everything and didn't look at books and budgets. I was just out there to "get it done." That get-it-done attitude can only take you so far; then you really need to understand your finances, because "just getting it done" doesn't always just get it done.

CFP: March is Women's History Month. What challenges have you faced—and overcome—as a woman business owner?

Webber: Well, banks are one. They're definitely run by men and they have what I call "man speak." I'm a big dyke—I have more testosterone than probably a lot of men—and I still don't have man speak. So, it was tough dealing with banks—tough to get them to pay attention and tough to get them to lend me money. I always hate to cry like



that, though. I don't like other women to use that as an excuse to not try to go for it.

Honestly, I can only think of the positive things. Being a woman was very helpful to me when I was starting out because I dealt mostly with housewives, and they really enjoyed dealing with a woman in an industry where they mostly dealt with men. I treated them respectfully; they trusted me.

CFP: It's no secret that you're a lesbian. How important is it to you to be an out businessperson?

Webber: It's very important to me to be out. Absolutely. It's never been an issue. I've never hidden the fact that I'm gay. In fact, it's helped me. A lot of times, I think it takes away some of that sexual bullshit that happens when you're dealing with contractors and different males that are managing projects, because you don't have all that "she's hot, he's hot" stuff going on—all that game playing that goes on between straight people. A lot of guys see me as a guy, so they feel real comfortable working with me. And if they don't, I just bring a guy along.

I feel like being out and being gay has helped me so much because there are so many gay people out there that really want to work with other gay people. That to me has been a blessing. I'll give you an example. When I first started, I was just doing little yards. There was this guy, though, and he owned a store in Chicago. It was a little gardening store and he was the landscape architect and he was gay, so he called me up—I had met him at some gay party—and he said, "I'm doing some drawings for this gal. Her dad owns the United Center. I'm doing the drawings and I want you to do the installation." So I met this gal and she introduced me

to her father and to the facility managers at the United Center, and that's how I was able to get that job. It all came about because of this guy, who thought it was pretty cool that he was gay and I was gay. I can't say names, but there are a lot of gay people who work for the City of Chicago and we pull for each other. In my business, I can't get a job just because somebody likes me, but it's nice to know that I have some real good support.

CFP: Lately, you've been making a lot of contributions to the community. In May, for instance, you're hosting the Lesbian Community Care Project's (LCCP) Garden of EVE event at your LEED-certified headquarters. Is "giving back" important to you?

Webber: I totally believe that one of the reasons I am successful is because I give back so much. People are kind of astounded by it, but I really believe it comes back to me tenfold. It's really a superstition of mine. I'm blessed, and not giving back feels like suicide for my business.

I've never been as involved in the gay community as I have been recently, though. I donated for the [Richard M. Daley Roof-top Garden at Center on Halsted]—I did the whole rooftop garden for free—and that sort of kicked me into gear, because once you give, more people ask. I had never really done much with the gay community because nobody really asked me. Now I get asked more.

I have three different things that I really support: landscaping issues, of course, gay and women issues, and anything with kids. I especially try to help the lesbian community, because there's just not a lot of money out there for women.