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Orr recalls years at UMM

Summary: Peter Orr will mark over 32 years as the landscape maintenance supervisor at UMM when he retires on May 19, 2006. He remembered the changes that have occurred since he replaced former grounds keeper, Wes Gray, on December 17, 1973.

(April 25, 2006)-When Peter Orr began working for the University of Minnesota, Morris, the campus could purchase a lawn mower for \$3,400. The most recent mower purchased by Plant Services at UMM now cost \$55,000. What a difference 32 years makes.

Orr will mark over 32 years as the landscape maintenance supervisor at UMM when he retires on May 19, 2006. He talked about the changes that have occurred both on the physical campus and in his campus role since he replaced former grounds keeper, Wes Gray, on December 17, 1973.

Coming to Morris from the Twin Cities to apply for the UMM job, Orr was interviewed by UMM administrator Steve Granger and Harold Fahl, then Plant Services supervisor. Orr remembered that his first assignment was to work with the State during the construction of the Highway 59 bypass.

"We wanted the road to be more focused on the campus instead of following old Second Street. At that time the East campus entrance was created," said Orr.

"I have worked with Peter for over 12 years in his capacity as grounds supervisor," said Lowell Rasmussen, UMM associate vice chancellor for physical plant and planning. "This means that Peter was doing what he has done so well for over 20 years before I showed up on the Morris campus."

One of Orr's passions, and a source of pride for him over the years, was planting about 1,500 trees on the campus since he's worked there.

"There weren't many trees when I came," said Orr. "It takes a long time to grow a tree. Trees are more important than the foundation plantings around the buildings."

Dutch Elm disease was generally rampant in the 1970s when Orr started at UMM. It was thought by some that, due to the more northerly climate in Morris, Dutch Elm disease wouldn't be a problem. Unfortunately, many of the campus elm trees would eventually need to be replaced. Hybrid elms, more resistant to the disease, were planted, as were many other tree varieties.

"I learned about the soil, such as the fact that it is high alkaline," said Orr, who holds a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from the U's St. Paul campus. "Trees such as birch won't grow well on the campus."

"It was gratifying to understand that Peter had built a tremendous knowledge base of the care and operation of these

grounds. He understood the needs of a growing campus and had the wisdom to aggressively move ahead with plantings and grounds work," said Rasmussen.

As one might imagine, there have been significant changes over the years during which Orr has worked at UMM.

"It used to be that a lot of things could be accomplished with a handshake," said Orr. "Now it's more formal -- you need a committee or a contract." In addition, due to a tighter budget, the physical plant staff has been significantly reduced. On the other hand, added Orr, the equipment with which they work has improved and Plant Services staff people have an excellent knowledge of grounds work.

There have been more positive improvements as well, specifically in the areas of recycling and transportation. Orr credits UMM students with building the foundation for the current recycling program on campus which answers a state recycling mandate for all publicly- funded schools. A state grant helped with funding when the campus program originally consisted of recycling only aluminum cans and office paper. Today about 20 percent of the solid waste on campus is recycled. While it's not a big money maker, said Orr, last year, UMM recycled 67 tons of waste. At \$207 per ton, UMM realized a savings of \$13,969 by recycling instead of throwing aluminum, corrugated cardboard, office paper, among other refuse, into the garbage.

"Income from recycling provides the campus with funding to offset some operational costs," said Orr. Among the equipment needed for an efficient recycling program are a pickup to pick up waste to be recycled, a big shredder to shred the large volume of confidential paper and a baler to bale cardboard and plastic.

Transportation on campus has also seen an evolution. The Cougar Bus more than served its purpose transporting athletic teams and student on field trips to their destinations. More 15-passenger and mini vans have been added to the fleet of vehicles at UMM. Today, there are four hybrid vehicles in UMM's transportation fleet, used for University business travel.

In addition, said Orr, B-20 fuel – which is 20 percent soy -- is used in all of the campus grounds off-road diesel vehicles. "We feel that it's our responsibility as a public institution to be in the forefront of using fuels that are environmentally friendly," said Orr.

The next time you visit the UMM campus, you may notice the beauty of the grounds, the trees and the flower gardens, and remember that Peter Orr had a hand in creating and maintaining that beauty. Orr recognizes that the campus grounds provide a visitor's first introduction to the campus he wants that impression to be a positive one.

"People spend a lot of time on the campus," said Orr. "There are areas for activity and passive areas that reach beyond the buildings. These places also contribute to the educational experience.

"I appreciate all of the people I've worked with and interacted with over the years," added Orr. "They've made my job a lot easier. Students, staff and faculty have all played a part in what the campus looks like now."

"We now enjoy the benefits of a wonderful tree canopy throughout the campus that would not have existed without the dedication and vision of Peter," added Rasmussen. "So few of us have the opportunity to pass on the fruits of our labor to future generations to appreciate and enjoy. Peter understood how important that task was, and clearly was the right person at the right time to provide leadership and dedication to UMM.

"We will miss his physical presence when Peter retires, but his legacy is obvious to anyone who walks through the campus," said Rasmussen.

Orr and his wife, Pam, will move to their native Houston, Minnesota, when Peter retires. The Orr family also includes two daughters: Jennifer, a physical therapist who lives in Caledonia and Carrie Bruns, a legal secretary, who works for a LeSeur County attorney's office.

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