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Lawn Boy

By Barbara Clay

Future Farmers of America was the dream of a suburban boy in Wisconsin. My husband, John Clay, loved the idea of driving tractors, working with equipment and taking care of the land. Life led him to become an elementary school teacher, and he was able to combine his passions for education and farming by providing a lawn service that went well beyond your basic lawn care. I have had the privilege of being the “bookkeeper” for the JC Lawn Care service, and I’d like to share the story of how a good heart can positively affect a community.

John began teaching third grade at Eden Lake Elementary in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, in 1987. This was a dream come true for a recent college graduate who left a teaching position in Wisconsin, moved to Minnesota to marry his sweetheart, and had to teach as a substitute for a year and a half. During that time of transition, John began to mesh his love for teaching with his love for working the land. He started a small service in an aging neighborhood where he focused on helping widows with their lawn care needs. This was the inauguration of the JC Lawn Care Service.

As a couple, we moved to Eden Prairie in 1993 where John could be both teacher and a member of the community. During his time in the classroom, several of John’s students, both boys and girls, did not have father figures in the home. This spurred on the next phase of the lawn service. John hired these kids, starting at age 11, so he could help to provide some of the guidance they were missing. Each employee had to agree to the following:

- Be on time for work
- Commit to and show up for work (unless a family event or homework conflicted and notice was provided)
- Put half of their earnings into the bank for further education
- Share their savings progress by presenting their bank deposit book throughout the season

Over the years, employment expanded to any student who was interested in working, and a couple of heartwarming stories evolved.

The first is the story of a young boy who was being raised by a single mother. Josh Stalvig began working for John at the age of 11. He continued his employment through college and up until his early 30s to help supplement his income and support his growing family. Along the way, the Stalvigs became family friends. Josh asked John to be a groomsman in his wedding. The funny thing was that the best man had been a previous



third-grade student of John's. The greatest tribute was that Josh named his youngest son John in honor of his mentor.

The second story combines John's love for the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, teaching and the lawn service.

The second story combines John's love for the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, teaching and the lawn service. John and his colleagues created an amazing award-winning program for their students at Eden Lake that used the Iditarod as a focus for teaching. During the program development, John had the opportunity to meet Gary Paulson, an author and a dogsled musher, first in Alaska and then on several other occasions. Eden Lake's Gifted and Talented teacher, a dear friend of John's, needed a meaningful way to teach her students about finances

and investing. Gary agreed to write a book with this focus in mind. Right in front of them was the practical application of these topics in the lawn service, leading to the idea for the book *Lawn Boy*. Check it out on Amazon!

It has been a great ride supporting the wonderful things that were offered through the lawn service. Not only has it provided learning opportunities and income for kids, supported family structures and supplied the idea for a book, it has also provided services free of charge for our church, a horse rescue farm and families in need. All of this came to be because there was once a young boy with a big heart who loved the land and wanted to give back to his community. ■



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