

Made (it) in America

BY TONY QUESADA | MANAGING EDITOR

The folded flag under glass on Ivan Giraldo's office wall goes with the framed document beside it attesting that the flag flew over the Texas Capitol the day he became a U.S. citizen in April 2001.

These days the Colombian native is living his American dream as co-owner of CleanScapes, a rapidly growing commercial landscape company with a portfolio that includes many of the premier buildings, shopping venues and apartment complexes in Central Texas.

"I've been blessed," Giraldo says.

And he's aware of how far he's come since he arrived in South Florida in 1985 at age 22. He spoke no English when his two older brothers living in Miami asked him to work for their new landscaping company.

But he was there for less than a year when he decided he wanted something better — and that he wasn't learning English as fast as he wanted to achieve whatever that something was. He moved to Texas, having a cousin in Arlington with a friend who translated for his interview at a manufacturing company, where he was hired as a painter. He took English lessons at night while he worked his way up to warehouse manager during his four years there before moving back to Miami.

During the next four years, he worked with his brother and got married. Giraldo and his wife, Logan, soon after moved to San Antonio, where his brother-in-law lived.

When he got to the Alamo City, Giraldo got wind of a landscaping company hiring in Austin — whose owners included Rex Gore, who would become his partner at CleanScapes. Giraldo started as a field laborer, and as he had done before, he worked his way up — to crew leader, supervisor and, following a merger, to branch manager.

He left to work for a residential landscaping company, and after a year he decided he was ready to go on his own.

He had maintained communications with Gore, and they started CleanScapes in



Ivan Giraldo
Co-owner, CleanScapes

mid-2005 with seven employees and three clients. In the second half of that year, it grossed \$755,000. In 2006, the business took off, grossing \$9.5 million. It followed that with more than \$26 million in revenues in 2007.

Giraldo wants to grow the business as long as he can maintain quality and customer service.

"Until then," he says, "the sky's the limit," with the potential to open branch or satellite offices in Texas and other states.

Giraldo thinks a lot about having his sons — Tomás, 9, and Cristian, 5 — join the business and about how he achieved what he has without a college degree.

"It took 24 years to get to this point," he says. "Maybe it would have taken half that time if I had gone to school."

He envisions more education for his sons. "It's not an option," he adds.

And while becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen was an option for him, it was a simple choice to make.

"I didn't want to be a temporary visitor any more," he says. "It's a great feeling when you come through customs from another country and the officers say, 'Welcome home.'"

The Q&A

Q: What issues are affecting your industry?

A: The immigration laws, particularly the H2B visa program. This program is extremely beneficial to our industry, but it needs vast improvements. I have traveled to our nation's capital to discuss improvements.

Rising fuel costs is another significant issue affecting the commercial landscape industry. It has had a direct effect on the operational costs of our equipment, products and transportation.

Q: How competitive is your industry in Central Texas? What drives that more, price or performance?

A: Our industry, in general, is extremely competitive. There are many startup commercial landscape companies from neighboring cities, including San Antonio, Dallas and Houston, who start businesses here. Keeping

