

Rexius family business evolved over time

It has grown to include a number of divisions related to tending the soil

By JANE BUREK
For The Register-Guard

Someone recently asked Dan Sutton, senior vice president of Rexius, what he did for a living. "I said landscaping, but that didn't really do it justice," said Sutton, a grandson of company founders Solomon and Lillian Rexius.

Incorporated in 1945 as Rexius Fuel Service, the company has grown to include a multitude of divisions that, one way or another, have to do with tending to the soil using environmentally sound practices. Most visible are the familiar mulch blowing trucks serving homeowners and commercial properties in Lane County. Additional divisions include: storage trailer rental, retail landscape products, equipment manufacturing, fleet rental, and a golf course construction and landscaping division.

"When you combine everything it looks like we're a huge company. But I still consider us a collection of small companies plugged into one," said Sutton,

REXIUS

Location: 1275 Bailey Hill Road, Eugene

Owners: Rusty Rexius, Arlen Rexius, Dan Sutton

Employees: 500

Annual revenue: \$15 million

Secret to Success: "Diverse divisions that are each operated as a small business"

whose first job was in 1978, operating a blower truck and making deliveries. Now Sutton and cousins Rusty and Arlen Rexius, the co-presidents, have executive roles in the family business, which is considered one of the oldest, most continuously prosperous green businesses in the state. Its owners say the present-day catch-phrase of "sustainable solutions" is old news for Rexius.

Converting organic waste into marketable agricultural products has been the company's bread and butter since its early days, when drivers delivered recycled 4-foot slabs of wood to fuel steam boilers at the University of Oregon and EWEB.

"The university was our first

and largest customer. From the 1940s to the mid-1980s many homes in the Willamette Valley had sawdust furnaces. My wife grew up with that kind of heat and remembers the Rexius truck rolling up and delivering a bin of sawdust," Sutton said.

That form of heating eventually was phased out. But, through the years, Rexius has looked for opportunities to collect various wood waste products that would otherwise be burned at the mill and process them for other purposes.

"We looked at what higher use of that waste from the mill could be sold. That's how we started processing material for landscape purposes," says Sutton. This included hauling waste from dairy and chicken farms and combining it with sawdust and manure. By 1986 Rexius Fuel Service became Rexius Forest By-Products, Inc. Today, it is known simply as Rexius.

"As states began regulating how much wood and green waste could be put in a landfill, companies like Rexius had even more reason to process that material," Sutton said. "As a green waste recycling and composting company we provide a service by creating products from the waste that was caus-

ing a problem."

Through the years Rexius has acquired and sold various divisions including Express Blower Trucks. Sol Rexius invented and built the first blower truck in 1950. "Our other grandpa, Marion Sutton, was the fabricator who built the truck. It's a neat family heritage. The blower trucks are internationally used for landscaping," Sutton said.

These days, Rexius' bags of bark, mulch and soil amendments such as chicken and organic steer compost are the top profit-makers. Sutton's theory is that the down economy has encouraged a nesting instinct among consumers.

"A lot of people are gardening and improving their home instead of spending money on vacations. People are planting gardens to help with the grocery budget and making their home their nest," Sutton said.

The raw materials for all 19 soil products the company sells are gathered locally.

"We take chicken manure and steer manure and mix it with sawdust for compost, soil amendments and ready-to-plant soil bags. The bags are in garden stores, and a lot of our soils are in nurseries and greenhouses across the state. All these plants

have to be grown in something, and we supply a lot of the materials," Sutton said.

Although most of the soils Rexius sells are available primarily in Northern California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho, the company's specialized orchid bark is shipped throughout the United States and Canada with additional distribution in Europe, Japan, Korea and Australia.

The company's golf course construction and maintenance division hasn't fared as well this year.

Despite having completed detailed irrigation, greens and box repair and erosion control projects in 2008 at Tokatee Golf Club in Blue River, Trysting Tree Golf Club in Corvallis, Olympia Country and Golf Club, and Sun Country Golf Club in Washington, the division was trimmed to 12 employees at the beginning of this year.

A gardener-hobbyist in his spare time, Sutton says he has one very important tip for all gardeners: mulch.

"It conserves water, protects from freezing and looks great."

As for being involved in a family business since his teen years, Sutton said he loves it. "I haven't heard raised voices in 35 years."

Law firm makes effort to diversify for future

Longtime attorney sees its objectives as having leadership and vision

By TINA OREM
For The Register-Guard

Jon Buerstatte really liked his first job out of college — so much so that he has stuck with it for almost 30 years.

He has earned a few promotions along the way, though. As the managing partner of Gleaves, Swearingen, Potter & Scott, a full-service business law firm, he is now what other companies would label as a CEO.

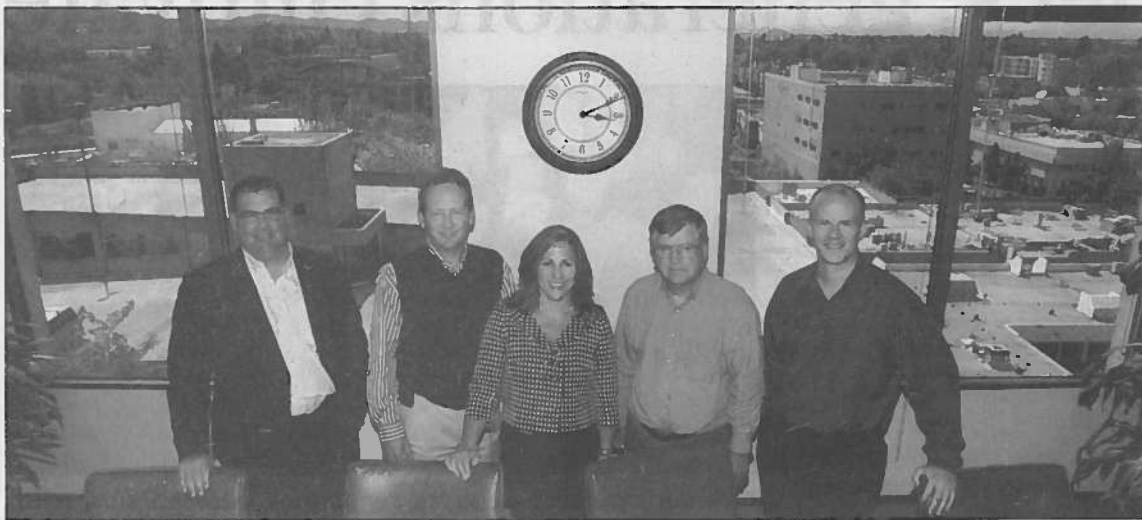
Back in the early 1980s, Buerstatte joined Gleaves as a fresh-faced 24-year-old law clerk.

Born in Walla Walla, Wash., Buerstatte is the youngest of three boys and grew up in Spokane. He earned an economics degree at Washington State University in 1979.

Law school wasn't in the cards at first. "I had expected I would go to graduate school possibly in economics," he recalls. "When I entered college, I thought maybe medical school or something. I didn't know for sure." But after realizing he was more interested in social sciences, he and his wife, who was his high school sweetheart, moved to Eugene right after graduation so that he could attend law school at the University of Oregon.

While there, he got the law clerk job at Gleaves. "Despite the fact that we had no intention originally to stay here," he says, "I had an opportunity to work with a very prominent, respected law firm which had a lot of lawyers that I respected." Nearly three decades later, Buerstatte, now 52, hasn't budged.

The law firm Buerstatte runs has been here for a long time, too. Formerly Butler, Husk & Gleaves, the firm started in 1924 and used to focus heavily on the flourishing agricul-



KEVIN CLARK/The Register-Guard

Thomas Herrmann (from left), Jon Buerstatte, Laura Montgomery, Stephen Lane and Dan Howard are attorneys with Gleaves, Swearingen, Potter & Scott.

tural and timber industries. The name evolved as partners joined and left, but in the 1980s the state began allowing law firms to keep their names when their namesakes departed. So, today Buerstatte's firm still carries the surnames of Vernon Gleaves, Arlen Swearingen, Stan Potter, and Malcolm Scott, all of whom — except for Scott — are no longer active in the firm.

Now, its clients range from Fortune 500 companies to mom-and-pop operations.

"Our business over the past several years has continued to increase substantially," Buerstatte says, although the recession has not overlooked Gleaves. Transactional and land use work has "slowed tremendously," he says. But because of the firm's broad practice, work in other areas — particularly bankruptcy law — has buoyed the firm.

The businesses and entrepreneurs Gleaves represents also fuel Buerstatte's calm optimism. "They're the ones that are going to be the earliest in taking advantage of opportunities that this current recession provides," he emphasizes. "And so I think it's most likely that we

are going to get busier sooner because of that."

His role in hand-crafting a diversified firm is another reason for his optimism. Several years ago, when some of Gleaves' most respected attorneys retired, Buerstatte helped manage the change, which was a challenge in succession planning.

"We knew we needed to do a lot of planning around that so that we could survive their departures," he says. "You simply cannot replace a Stan Potter or a Malcolm Scott and their 40-plus years of experience and knowledge and the respect they have in the profession and with their clients by somebody coming out of law school. You need to have good, experienced lawyers."

Helping the clients become comfortable with different, younger attorneys took a lot of work, Buerstatte said. "You really do have to think of the client's needs and desires. It's not as simple as saying 'Here is the next person,' and it doesn't happen overnight."

In addition to managing the transitions and hunting for the right replacements, Buerstatte took the team on retreats that

focused on the effort ahead.

"My role, I think, was to encourage everybody to work together to see that this happens," he says. "We knew that really our ability to be here and succeed for another 10 to 15 years depended on us being able to pull this off. We all needed to pull together, rally together to make sure this happened."

This kind of leading from the front can intimidate managing partners, especially when it means stepping out of a comfort zone. "Before even agreeing to do it, I think for a couple years I had to kind of come around to the idea that this was something I was willing to want to take on," Buerstatte says. To handle the job, Buerstatte says he read a lot, went to seminars, relied on his own skills and talked to other managing partners.

He's careful to add that earning the managing partner title doesn't mean he's at the peak.

"I would say that many very, very, very good attorneys never aspire to be a managing partner," he says. "So I would say that I'm not at the top of my game simply because I'm a managing partner. I think there's so

GLEAVES, SWEARINGEN, POTTER & SCOTT LLP

Address: 975 Oak St., Eugene

Employees: 25 attorneys, and more than 20 staff

Founded: 1924

Annual revenue: Not disclosed

Secret of Success: "Think long-term"

many really good lawyers whose strengths are elsewhere. That doesn't mean, of course, that they don't think they have much better ideas than the managing partner," he chuckles.

Buerstatte says he has no intention of outdoing Arlen Swearingen's 20-year record as managing partner. Managing partners typically stay for about five years, and then the partners elect a new one, Buerstatte notes. He's more inclined to go that route and expects to go back to practicing law full time.

But for now, Buerstatte's priorities are to grease the operational skids and make sure the firm's attorneys are happy, productive, and feel heard.

"It's like herding cats in many ways, because you're responsible for managing lawyers," Buerstatte said. "And lawyers all have very, very strong ideas, strong opinions, and are often extremely smart and have a lot of good ideas of their own."

Making Gleaves bigger or more profitable are not Buerstatte's highest priorities. "Making it a place that functions well and has leadership and vision" is a more productive objective, according to Buerstatte, who's learned a thing or two about sticking around.

"The profit and profitability follows," he says. "You need a longer-term vision and perspective if you're going to have a law firm that's going to be around awhile."

Serving Eugene for over 88 years