

TRUE TO HIS WORD

By Suz Trusty

Ian True is a man who gets things done; committed to delivering what he promises; true to his word. As national sales manager for Trebro Manufacturing, Ian is responsible for the company's sales and marketing and also "looks after" a territory that includes Canada, the northern US and Europe. Connecting with sod farmers across the globe entails lots of travel, currently putting him on the road one or two weeks a month. And he not only thrives on it; he looks for ways to do more. So it's not surprising when he says, "The opportunity to serve on the TPI Board of Trustees is one way I can give back to the industry that has been so good to me."

At Home

He's equally committed on the personal side. Life with wife Cathy started with a diamond. Ian was coaching his son's Little League baseball team. Cathy was cheering for her son, a player on the opposing team. As the season progressed, each observed the other's interaction with their sons, other kids, other parents, coaches and umpires. They liked what they saw. Ian says, "I was a single parent and so was she. I asked her out minutes before she asked me out. In 2000, I married that wonderful lady, who is also my best friend."

Their blended family has thrived, too. Son Rory is now 30; the opposing players, Kevin and Leith are 28, and Darcie is 26. Cathy and Ian are the proud grandparents of the adorable and charming Grace, 3-1/2 years old, and are anticipating the birth of a second grandchild in May. Ian says, "We're so thankful they're all in the



Ian True is in his work mode, talking about Trebro equipment.

local area and enjoy frequent Sunday dinners together as much as we do."

Ten years ago, Ian and Cathy built a house on an 11-acre site in Alliston, Ontario. Once a pasture, they've allowed the majority of the property to evolve to natural brush. The rest they maintain because, "I'm a 'want-to-be' turf farmer," says Ian. Why else would he mow 2.5 acres of turfgrass? Maybe it's that connection - the machinery, the farmer and the earth. The aroma of freshly cut turfgrass, recognizable world-wide, is especially sweet to those in the sod industry. Besides, it doesn't take too long, according to Ian. "I've got a big mower."

The Nottawasaga River is just down the hill from their home. The river and brush areas combined are a magnet for wildlife which Ian and Cathy both enjoy observing. Ian says, "The river is great for fishing for salmon and rainbow trout. Leith is an avid sportsman so he takes advantage of that even more than we do."

They also have a cabin on Lake Simcoe. "It's not winterized but, weather permitting, we spend much of April to November there," Ian says. "Lake Simcoe is part of the Trent-Severn Waterway that connects Lake Ontario and Lake Huron. Initially the waterway formed the transportation route for industry. Now it's used primarily for recreational boating. You can go just about anywhere once you make that Great Lakes connection."



Ian and Cathy enjoy the beauty of the countryside during the family's summer vacation to Ireland in 2014.

Living in snow country has perks in the winter, too. Ian adds downhill skiing and bit of snow shoeing to his activities list.

Giving back is part of what makes Ian, Ian. It's a legacy that took root early on. His mother, Shirley True, at 88 years young, lives alone in her own home, just minutes from Ian and Cathy, and still plays golf. Shirley is retired after years of service as a public health nurse. Long an avid volunteer to numerous charities, she has been recognized locally in the Hall of Fame for community service. So it's not surprising that Ian volunteers at a local food bank.

Cathy teaches first and second grade,

which restricts her travel schedule during the school year. But they still work in as much travel together as possible, whether it's a trip south in March or a TPI event. "I love that she enjoys the TPI family as much as I do. Besides, she's a better salesman than I am," says Ian, only partly in jest.

Starting in Sod

Ian's connection with turfgrass farms started in the early 70s when he needed a summer job. "I was one of a two-person harvesting team when hand stacking was the only option. One of us would drive the tractor while the other one stacked to fill five pallets. Then we'd switch spots. It was piece work; we were paid based on what we harvested. I was making \$100 a day."

That job financed his education at the University of Guelph, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in geography and mathematics. He quickly determined that career path would mean working indoors at a desk, not the right fit for an active, outdoor-loving kind of guy. After a year, he went back to the University to take their Turf Managers short course.

"I was interested in the industry, but not sure which segment of it," he says. "I thought maybe I'd become a golf course superintendent and did work on a golf course for a year. Then, in the late 70s, I went back to the sod farm for a summer."

Young, with no binding commitments,



Ian and granddaughter Grace share a magical musical moment.

"What Others Say"

"I've known and worked with Ian for 25 years or more. He'll always stop by when he comes into the states from Canada. He's a top notch salesman; the one to ask if you have a question about a machine. If you're looking for a piece of equipment, he'll help you find it, even if it doesn't pertain to what he's selling. He's one of the nicest, most down-to-earth people I know, always happy, always friendly. He can be quite comical, too. We've fished together in the U.S. and Canada and he's my golf partner for The Lawn Institute fund raiser. We're not very good, but we still have a great time."

Gary Kogelmann, president of
Kogelmann's Creek-Side Sod

"I've known Ian and his wife, Cathy, forever. Even back in the 70s and mid-80s, when we purchased a machine, he'd work with us elbow to elbow to set it up. And he's still doing a great job. I've worked with him at TPI and TPI shows. He's on the board and I'm in charge of the field days. He touches base with me; keeps me up to date, which I really appreciate. I could never explain the absolutely wonderful attitude and gratitude and the back and forth camaraderie in the sod business. Ian is the prime example of that—a fabulous person."

Mike Blair, farm manager of the
Production Farm
for Green Velvet Sod Farms

"I've worked with Ian for many years, talking with him once or twice a week, and have traveled with him through Europe and Scandinavia. He is a very good salesman, one of the longest-serving representatives in the industry. He'll always return your phone call or respond to your email. You can trust and rely on him; those are the most important things in a business relationship. On the personal level, he's a genuine, nice man, easy to be around and to talk with."

Peter van Mispelaar,
owner/director of Vanmac

he opted for an adventure, backpacking through Europe for 8 months with Joan, a long-time friend. Ian says, "It was a great experience, touring wherever we wanted, when and as long as we wanted." During that trip, the duo forged a stronger relationship, based on trust, mutual respect and the growing understanding that they made a great team. After returning home, they became a couple and started planning a future together.

At that point, reality kicked in and Ian decided it was time to get into a career. "I knew the sod industry," he says. "And I saw how things were done. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but I didn't want to stack sod for the rest of my life. The last thing I thought I wanted to be was a salesman. Then, in 1979, Gerry Brouwer offered me a position selling machinery." Job in hand, 1979 was also the year Ian and Joan married.

Ian spent about 8 months in the factory learning the machines to prepare for his first sales trip. "My territory was western Canada and the central US. I was 25 years old when they set me free in a truck with a full load of equipment. They sent me to Manitoba and Saskatchewan and jokingly told me not to come back until I'd sold it all."

That was back in the days when salespeople used a pay phone and a bunch of quarters to reach their customers. "We didn't even have fax machines," Ian reports. "Overseas communication was by Telex, with an exchange of short sentences punctuated by 'stop' to alert the other party it was their turn to talk."

Challenges on the personal side ran much deeper; Joan was diagnosed with brain cancer. With the support of Ian and their two boys, she fought valiantly. "Family and friends, many of them from the sod industry, rallied around us. But the cancer was too strong to overcome," says Ian. "We lost her in 1994." Coping



Ian and Cathy join Chip and Shari Lain of Pine Island Turf Nursery in celebrating Chip's catch during the couple's visit to the True's cabin on Lake Simcoe.

with grief became the next battle, but the three did what they had to do, moving forward one step at a time.

In true Ian fashion, he worked his way up, from salesman to district sales manager to sales manager for Brouwer's North American and global sales.

Moving On

In April of 2003, Ian joined Trebro Manufacturing. He says, "I saw a young, innovative company willing to put in whatever it took to advance the turfgrass sod industry. They were the first to come up with an automated turf harvester. They had invested years on R & D to get to that point. They started working on the research in 1986 and they incorporated in 1999."

By July 2003, Trebro was featuring three products at the TPI Summer Convention and Field Days - the Stackit, the HarveStack and the AutoStack. Ian says, "There were enough of the machines out there that people knew that they worked and were reliable and dependable. And, with the labor savings, they would soon pay for themselves. People were lining up in our tent to sign orders. We had \$12 million in sales that day."

While Ian doesn't expect to ever see a day like that again, he does point to it as a prime example of the benefits of TPI membership. "The networking is priceless. And it's all with great people. Sod farms are family-run businesses.

Sod farmers are hard-working, honest and fair. How could you not enjoy working with them?"

Trebro sells directly to the customer in Canada and the US, backing that up with support through a strong parts department and four service techs that provide training and help customers troubleshoot. Internationally, Advanced Equipment in Ontario services the Canadian market; Vanmac in Holland looks after Europe; Trebro UK covers Great Britain; and Sammut Agricultural Machines is the dealer in Australia. Trebro also has customers in South Africa.

Now, with all the different models, there are over 750 Trebro turf harvesters out in the market globally.

Trebro is a supplier member and supporter of TPI and of many other state, province and national turf growers

associations, including Australia, the UK, and Canada. You'll find Ian at local, state and regional turfgrass sod producer and turfgrass association shows throughout North America and overseas. In areas that don't do shows, he'll set up a Trebro Day to showcase a new product and work with a local sod farmer to host it. He's not only selling equipment, he's promoting TPI at all his stops.

He became involved with what was then called the American Sod Producers in 1979, attending the field days as an exhibitor and showing equipment. He stepped up his activity in 1993 when he became part of TPI's Manufacturers Advisory Council. He joined TPI's Membership Working Group, its ambassadors, about 15 years ago and now chairs the Group. (See article: "Ambassadors Tout TPI to Turf Pros Worldwide," on page 44 of the September/October issue of Turf News.) He's also been TPI's top recruiter in recent years.

Looking Ahead

Ian and the other members of the TPI Board of Trustees are optimistic about the future of the association and the turfgrass industry. As part of TPI's strategic plan, they and the TPI staff are reaching out to expand North American and overseas involvement, developing and strengthening alliances with turfgrass sod producers and their associations around the world.

Ian says, "We do need to talk about some sort of green certification for members as well. Many sod farms in this day and age need to be more proactive in documenting all the things

they do to be good stewards of the environment. The Nursery Sod Growers Association of Ontario (NSGA) is a good example of an association that has implemented such a program." Ian is also a member of NSGA and attends their events which helps strengthen the alliance for both groups. He says, "A strong majority of the Ontario membership are also TPI members; one of the highest percentages of any state or province association."

TPI's executive director, Melanie Stanton, is a key part of these initiatives, recently attending the Seminar and Field Day jointly sponsored by Barenbrug Holland and Vanmac. (See article on pages 34-35) She's also interacting with other turf industry associations by serving on some of their key committees and is establishing a TPI presence through outreach efforts such as a booth at the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) trade show. Ian says, "She's brought new life to TPI."

Ian notes, "There are challenges as well, such as water and pesticide use issues, but we're optimistic about meeting those and overcoming them. As lovers of the land we are stewards of the land. We need to be real lobbyists in communicating the environmental benefits of natural turfgrass through every possible venue."

He finds it ironic that people say negative things about natural turfgrass, yet are enthusiastic about artificial turf even though it has their children playing on a surface infilled with crumb rubber that can contain materials such as benzene, carbon black and lead. "More research is needed in that area," Ian says.

So, what makes Ian tick? Tackling challenges; seeking innovation; developing alliances; strengthening relationships. He says, "What I love about this business is the privilege of meeting with my customers face-to-face, people that I respect, building relationships that extend beyond business to lifelong friendships - and enjoying every step of the process."

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All photos courtesy of Ian True.



For Grandpa Ian, every get together with Grace is a very special adventure.

