

Entrepreneurs/Innovations

Young Entrepreneur is a Natural in the Stone Business



Photos by Ted Morin, Jr.

John Webber, owner of Southern Stone in Donna, aims high in business.

By Elizabeth C. Martinez
Managing Editor

Three years ago John Webber, 28, started selling stone out of his 1997 Ford F-250 pick-up. To most, it might seem unusual that a college grad was running a two-man landscaping business (himself and an assistant) and selling stone on the side. But, Webber's hard work and determination led him down the path that he created himself. Now Webber, who was just cutting lawns a few years back, is owner of Southern Stone, LLC located at 1100 E. Expressway 83 in Donna.

Webber, who is originally from Victoria, but has family roots in Harlingen and Weslaco; received his bachelor's degree in business administration in 2002 from Texas State University, formerly known as Southwest Texas State University. After graduation he moved to the Rio Grande Valley because he believed in the opportu-

nities available for a young, aspiring entrepreneur.

He spent a few months working odd jobs, but was not happy. He decided to open his own landscaping business, something he was already familiar with. He started mowing lawns and trimming hedges while he was in high school in Victoria.

One day, a customer's request changed everything for Webber. His customer wanted him to install some stone in front of the house, so Webber ventured out to buy the material—\$450 for stone. At that moment something in Webber clicked. He knew exactly what needed to get done next. Shortly after that, Webber was online doing research about various stones and was traveling to Mexico to visit different mines. It didn't take Webber long to go from selling out of the back of his pick-up truck to opening his own store.

With the help of his family, who own



Escobar Auto Electric in Weslaco, he was able to get started. The Escobar family gave him 2.5 acres to set up his store and his uncle, Omar Escobar, chief executive officer of Escobar Auto Electric, lent him \$10,000.

With that money, Webber built his store. "While I was setting up the store, I was still cutting grass," Webber said. "Eventually I ran out of money before I had any inventory. All I had were a few pallets of stone left over from other sales. It was about \$1,500 worth of inventory. I had just ordered electricity for the store and didn't even know if I would be able to pay my first light bill."

To supply working capital, Webber received a \$25,000 Small Business Administration loan. His fiancée, Sylvia, patiently supported him the first year and a half—for that, Webber said he is very grateful.

"Sylvia took care of all of my bills, and sacrificed right along with me. She believed in me," said Webber, who is getting married in October. "Now she works as my assistant and the store supports us both."

A lot has changed since Webber first opened Southern Stone. His modest \$1,500 inventory is now at \$75,000. Instead of doing all the heavy lifting himself and using his pick-up to haul stone, he now owns three forklifts, a delivery truck and has hired a full-time driver.

"Usually it takes about three years to make a profit from a new business, but luckily I've had profit from the beginning.

My first goal was to pay my uncle back, which I did," Webber said. "Now, I am working on expanding the store and growing the business."

Southern Stone is the only supplier in the Valley that only sells natural stone, says Webber. "By specializing in just one thing it allows us to be as knowledgeable as possible in that product," he said. Webber sells sandstone, limestone, patio stone, flagstone, boulders, and ledge stone—which all come from mines throughout Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma.

Webber said stone is a luxury item that customers add to their homes. "Our customers are mostly contractors and home builders," Webber explained. "Our material is often used in place of brick. It is used for many elements of home construction and for landscaping. We also sell to swimming pool companies that use the stone for water falls, or for decking around the pool."

The humble businessman said that being an entrepreneur is "in the blood."

"My grandfather Escobar, who passed away, was my mentor," Webber shared. "He started his business from scratch and became very successful. He was the most humble and hard-working millionaire I knew. As a kid, I always looked up to him. There was no doubt in my mind that I could own a business. I would say, 'I want to be a lawyer, so I can save money and open my own business or I want to be an orthodontist, so I can save money and open my own business.' When I grew up, I realized I could skip the middle part and just open my own business."

Webber admits that he has come a long way from his landscaping days, but feels he still has a long way to go. "This is just a stepping stone," Webber said. "I still see Southern Stone as my lawn mowing business. I want to continue to be successful and provide my customers all over Texas, a great product."

For more information about Southern Stone visit www.southernnaturalstone.com or call 956.464.5979.