



# KANSAS ALUMNI

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## Merchants of Fun

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■ ILLUSTRATED INSECTS ■ HARDWORKING HEROES



# Campus



From snow and ice removal to spring landscaping, KU crews ensure campus is safe and beautiful year-round



STEVE RUPPE

Jones and Harding



SUSAN YOUNGER

# Caretakers



by Heather Biele

Each May, thousands of KU families and friends descend on Mount Oread to celebrate the success of graduating Jayhawks at Commencement. And each year, without doubt, returning alumni and guests marvel at the sheer beauty of the Lawrence campus, with its immaculate lawns, brilliant spring blossoms and groves of lush green trees.

In the weeks leading up to the annual event, the KU landscaping crew works tirelessly, logging 10-hour days to mow, trim, mulch and plant—all to ensure that the University's sprawling backdrop is at its finest for the weekend festivities.

KU groundskeepers delivered yet again this year, albeit under particularly challenging circumstances.

"A year ago, I had 34 people," says Mike Jones, who supervises landscape services along with Kale Laverentz, '14, and Larry Rawlings. "Now I have 13. We're spread really thin, but the 13 people that I have ... I can trust them. We get the job done."

If the idea of that many workers maintaining nearly 1,000 acres of land in the spring sounds daunting, consider this: Just a few months ago, this same crew worked even longer days, in even tougher conditions, to keep campus safe—and

open, as much as possible—during one of the most relentless winters this region has experienced in years.

According to the National Weather Service, more than 17 inches of snow fell on the Lawrence campus from Oct. 1 through April 9, with significant amounts reported on nearly a dozen days. By comparison, about 13 inches of snow was measured collectively over the past two years.

"It was definitely the worst since I've been here," says Shawn Harding, director of KU Facilities Services, who oversees landscaping for all of the Lawrence

campus, as well as maintenance for the University's academic, recreational and athletics buildings. He's worked in the department since 2011. "We've had some bad snows. Five years ago, we had a 10- to 12-inch snow that shut campus down, I think, for two days. But that was one event within a season that was otherwise normal. This season was every week, if not every three or four days at times."

Despite the fact that campus has grown steadily over the past five to 10 years, as evidenced by the recent completion of the 40-plus acre Central District; the Earth, Energy & Environment Center; the DeBruce Center; and new homes for the schools of business, engineering and pharmacy, statewide budget cuts have hampered the number of employees Facilities Services can hire.

"If anything, we've gotten smaller as campus has gotten bigger," Harding says.

**B**y the time members of the KU and Lawrence communities arrived at the Lied Center to see the Feb. 19 performance of the Japanese drumming troupe Kodo, a winter weather advisory was well underway. Conditions worsened as the evening progressed; temperatures plummeted and heavy snow buried the region.

Jones and three other groundskeepers,

who had reported for their normal shifts at 6:30 a.m., had loaded their Ford F-350 trucks with sand early in the day, pretreating campus parking lots and roads in preparation for the storm. It was déjà vu for the crew, who just four days earlier had cleared campus after blizzard-like conditions swept through Lawrence.

As the Tuesday-evening storm intensified, the four men returned to the Lied Center to plow and sand the parking lot and clear paths for guests to return safely to their cars. Getting them home was another matter.

"Every time we would plow something it would drift back up," Jones recalls, citing winds that gusted to nearly 30 mph. "We had cars stuck, and we were running out of sand. We had to run back to the shop and reload."

He and his crew battled treacherous conditions for two hours, clearing routes and assisting more than a half-dozen vehicles that had careened off Crestline Drive after leaving the hilltop performance hall. Jones and another groundskeeper had to travel back to the center loading dock to help the Kodo troupe members navigate their trucks off the lot.

"We're just thinking, this is crazy," says Jones, who worked through the night before going home to sleep for an hour. He and his crew were back on campus at 5:15

a.m. Wednesday, plowing campus roads and sidewalks for the anticipated arrival of students, faculty and staff.

Classes were postponed until 10 a.m. that morning, one of seven campus closures or delays KU experienced this year—more than any other academic year in at least four decades. When severe weather could potentially affect campus operations, the University implements an emergency operation command, or EOC. The Federal Emergency Management Agency-based procedure involves several campus units, including the Office of Public Safety and Facilities Services, which report on the possibility of hazardous conditions and the readiness of campus crews to respond. A core group of administrators makes the decision to cancel classes or close campus based largely on those departments' recommendations.

"We're trying to determine if campus is going to be safe to travel, and travel being in vehicle or on foot," says Harding, who explains that several EOC calls occurred late at night or early in the morning, depending on the timing of the severe weather threat. "If the answer is no, because of what's coming, then we decide to close campus. That's really the long and short of it."

Whether campus remains open or closes, Harding and Jones consider several factors in their approach to keeping KU safe, including the type of precipitation expected and the needs of campus during a severe weather event. A Saturday-night storm might necessitate only the immediate clearing of campus accessibility routes and roads for emergency vehicles, whereas a weekday weather event most likely involves pretreatment of stairs and sidewalks to keep those walkways passable for pedestrians. Another consideration, which was a factor during the Feb. 19 snowstorm, is whether the Lied Center or

.....  
 Andy Peterson (l-r), Mike Jones and Phil Vaughn planted a Frontier elm east of the Price Computing Center on April 22. KU Information Technology staff collected \$150 to purchase the tree for Earth Day.



SUSAN YOUNGER



Dalton Wanna (l-r), Rick Virtue, Thane Haug, Phil Vaughn, Larry Rawlings, Jamie Jarrett, Tom North, Kale Laverentz, Reggie Walsh and James Traul were among the KU groundskeepers who kept campus roads, sidewalks and stairs clear of snow and ice this winter.

another campus venue is hosting an event, which affects how quickly crews respond to those areas.

“Prioritization was a constant conversation throughout the winter,” Harding says.

Because of the incessant nature of this season’s storms—there was at least one severe weather event most weeks in January and February—Harding enlisted other Facilities Services crews to assist with snow and ice removal. The trade shops, which include plumbers, carpenters and electricians, tackled all of the campus stairs, while the custodial group was responsible for clearing paths from the buildings to the sidewalks. The landscaping crew took over from there, sweeping through with John Deere tractors equipped with plows or heavy-duty brooms, depending on the type of precipitation. A small team of four groundskeepers, led by Jones, also cleared nearly 210

miles of campus roads, no matter the time of day.

“Those four people I relied on at 1 in the morning to answer their phones,” Jones says. “They could’ve told me no and none of them did. We came in and we worked 14, 15, 16 hours to get the streets cleared. I thought we did a heck of a job, for what we had.”

With each storm, the facilities crews found ways to streamline their response time and become more efficient, including hiring an outside contractor to clear several campus parking lots so KU staff could focus on other areas. “We did it so many times that every time we learned something or we found some way to do something better,” says Harding, who also drove one of the plow trucks this year. “We just kept building on the experience and tried to make it better.”

Still, by the end of the season, and after

crewmembers logged countless hours of overtime, fatigue had set in. “I had to keep a positive attitude,” Jones says. “You know, everybody looks up to me. As soon as they see a supervisor or a manager with a bad attitude, it just rolls downhill and everything goes to hell. All my guys, I just talked to them: ‘This is our job; we’ve just got to do it.’”

Months later, with winter mercifully in hindsight, Harding reflects on the season with nothing but pride for his crews—and no regrets for the decisions made regarding campus closures. “I just really think that with shrinking staff numbers and trying to get smarter every time, we were right on par,” he says. “Even though I think of it as a failure when we can’t open campus, there’s just a time when you shouldn’t have people out walking



Reggie Walsh and Anthony Arnold helped unload nearly \$12,000 of assorted flowers that were delivered May 6. KU landscapers planted the colorful new shipment in campus flowerbeds the week before Commencement.

around or driving. For the most part, we were right on top of it the whole season, so I couldn't be prouder of our folks and how they responded."

In the weeks following the last few storms, KU groundskeepers addressed the season's harsh aftermath, filling hundreds of potholes on roads and in parking lots; assessing damage to stairs, sidewalks and campus signs; flushing sand and salt through the storm drains to prevent clogging; and determining whether shrubs, grass and other plants affected by plows and salt application could be saved. The University's service vehicles, which sustained extensive wear and tear over the past five months, needed immediate attention.

Fortunately, spring's long-awaited arrival brings a shift in focus for the landscaping crew: mowing lawns, planting and

trimming trees, and preparing flower beds for spring annuals. "Making campus look good," Jones says.

Though Harding has had to adjust to staff cuts by outsourcing certain tasks, like mowing, and allowing more campus land to grow naturally—which saves both fuel and manpower—our campus caretakers know they'll shoulder the majority of the landscaping efforts for this year's Commencement. In fact, the team of about a dozen workers recently hand-planted nearly \$12,000 worth of assorted flowers that arrived in early May.

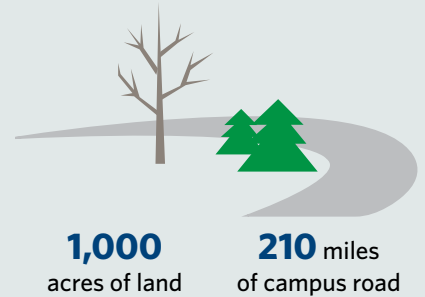
"It's definitely something each one of our folks takes pride in," Harding says. "They like working here because it's rewarding to go out, make an area of campus look better, and come in the next day and do the same thing somewhere else. That's what we strive to do."

## Winter Essentials

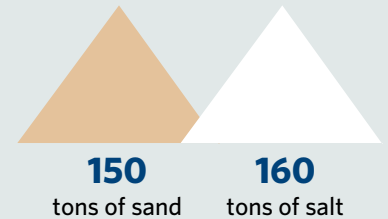


According to KU Facilities Services, the Lawrence campus went through four times more snow and ice removal products in 2018-'19 than in the past three years.

Here's an approximate look at the scope of the work:



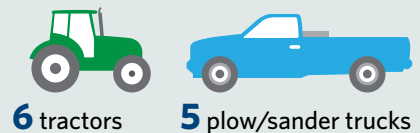
**150,000** pounds of ice melt



**3,500** gallons of anti-icing agent



**5,000** winter labor hours



**6** tractors

**5** plow/sander trucks