

## Sterling's business far more than the average tree service

Walhall County is home to quite a few success stories. In practically all those cases it's the result of a combination of factors, not the least of which includes a willingness to work hard, self-motivation and drive.

Anyone familiar with Craig Sterling will tell you he fits the bill.

The 47-year-old Sterling came to Tylertown 17 years ago. At the time he was living in McComb with his mom. Prior to that he'd lived all over—in Atlanta at one time—as a kid in Las Vegas.

Without going into a lot of detail, Sterling relates his dad was a gambler—lost it all. Both parents are substance abusers—alcohol. They moved around a lot—usually running from bill collectors.

Hard knocks—Sterling knows. He's had 'em. "When you're 11-12 years old in that environment...you raise yourself," he said.

So, when Sterling says he started with nothing 17 years ago...he's correct.

It was 2005. He had started a small stump grinding business and was in Tylertown trying to hustle jobs from homeowners, especially those who had lost trees because of Hurricane Katrina that had just cut a path through the area. Trees were down. Stumps were left, and Sterling wanted to take advantage of the business opportunity. Not a lot of people were grinding stumps at the time.

Sterling said he came through Tylertown, pulled up at a house on Ratliff Drive, that belonged to Greg Boyd at the time, did his stumps for \$40. Later, he pulled into the local truck stop with his grinder. Alton Harvey drove up, asked him about grinding stumps on his place and he got the job.

Turned out that Alton was working for Rushing Realty at the time and had the Boyd house listed. A month later Sterling bought the house on Ratliff Drive.

"I wasn't married...had no kids...and now I had a three-bedroom house," he said.

Almost as if things were pre-destined, Sterling said he later met his future wife, Heather.

"She had two kids. I had two extra bedrooms. It just all came together," he said.

It all evolved from his initial stump grinding business, riding around neighborhoods picking up jobs. From there he evolved into tree work.

"Trees are a good business. Around here you have these storms. They either get blown down or damaged and eventually start dying so they need to be removed," he said.

So, for the next few years Sterling specialized in stump grinding and tree work, mostly residential customers, building up a good reputation and business as time went on. And all along he invested part of his earnings back into the business.

Around 2016 Sterling hooked up with a contractor that had a Mississippi Department of Transportation contract. He signed on as a subcontractor and got involved in tree removal along MDOT right of way and bridges.

Then, two years ago, Sterling was successful in obtaining his own MDOT contract.

"When I became an MDOT vendor I signed on to do 30 double bridges between Natchez and Vicksburg on Hwy. 61," he said.

Before long he'd turned a one month contract into six months of work doing all the bridges to the Mississippi River; then doing the river bridge, too.

Sterling started into forestry mulcher work with the MDOT contracts. Trees grow underneath bridges and, if not taken out, they hit the bottom of the bridge.

While residential work is important to the business, Sterling says the state contracts really made his business grow. He took the profits and invested in equipment.

The Sterlings recently completed a house on Horseshoe Road. Set back in the woods, Sterling says he likes the privacy it affords, plus the convenience to town, only a few minutes away.

Originally, he had intended to build a shop on the land with his house, but going back and forth to his house, he noticed the former Quick Lube in the triangle of Old Hwy. 98 and Hwy. 48. He contacted Jack Cantrell of Rushing Realty and they contacted the owners, Otis and Kathy Robbins.

"It wasn't listed, but they agreed to sell," he said.

Noting the traffic count on the highways passing the location, Sterling said the building and property will serve well as a place to store and maintain his equipment, provide office space, plus display his equipment.

"It's good advertising. People see your equipment. It shows what you can do."

Sterling has considered equipment rental as part of the business.



Sterling at the controls of the state's only saw-grapple-crane truck. With it, his crew can accomplish tasks efficiently. He also has a remotely controlled stump grinder.



This will serve as the new office and location for Sterling's business, Stumps Unlimited & Tree Removal. Sterling says the former oil change business is the ideal location for his business.



Craig Sterling and his equipment lineup. He's invested heavily in new equipment which makes it possible for him to perform contract work for the Mississippi Department of Transportation, as well as custom tree work for the public.

ness—the rental price will include equipment and operator—as Sterling's equipment is pretty high tech, so it's important that he supplies a trained operator.

Sterling purchased a saw-grapple truck with a remote control. He says it's the only one of its kind in the state. He's also invested in a remote control stump grinder.

"I try to invest back into the business. That's how you grow," he said.

He's posted videos of his equipment in action on his website—www.stumpsunlimited.com. Like he says, a picture is worth a thousand words. Spend a few minutes on the website and you can see what Sterling and his crew can accomplish because they have the equipment and training necessary.

Admittedly, Sterling's company is far more advanced than the average tree cutter, he says his equipment and the two trained operators he depends on, in addition to himself, allow them to do jobs that would otherwise be impossible or impractical for the average tree cutter.

He points to the former Michael Langhart residence on Hwy. 583.

"They'd built this house around a porch with a tree in the middle. Eventually, the tree grew to stretch all over the house," he said.

When it came time to remove it, Sterling was able to do so with his remote control truck.

He says the saw-grapple truck can also be outfitted with a crane. With it, he's able to lift a tree up and over its surroundings and set it down on the ground.

"We're able to take whole tops out of trees, bring them over power lines and set them on the ground, over lights and signs and everything," he said.

By being able to do so, they can accomplish safe and efficient tree removals that would otherwise be dangerous.

"Slay Miller, Vernon Price Jr. are my main guys. When we do MDOT work, there are a couple other guys with us," he said.

Sterling credits his success because of a turnaround in his

own life some years ago. Since his own childhood was unstable, he's made sure his own family situation is different than his own.

His family is involved in Tylertown Baptist Church, taking part in the Judgement House presentation. And he makes sure he's involved with his family and kids by setting an example.

"My kids are 13 and 11. They've never heard me cuss or seen me drink a beer. In town, we lived on a third acre lot. Now they can get out in the yard and play," he said.

## Running offers insight to Sterling's business

Craig Sterling admits he has a passion for running. The drive that makes Craig run is one of the reasons his stump grinding, tree removal and forest mulcher business is successful. It's the way he approaches life.

Sterling, 47, hits the trail before dawn daily on his six mile run. While it's health and fitness...it's also the way he approaches business. And like he says, there are some situations where machinery can't do the job, so it takes someone in physical shape to tackle removing trees by hand.

Sterling consistently ranks in the top runners in the state, both overall and in age group.

In early December 2022, he finished second overall in the Run Run Rudolph 5K at Brookhaven with a time of 20:47.3. While he was second place overall, he was first in his age group of 40-49.

In October, Sterling did the Osyka Breast Cancer Awareness run, another 5K, finishing second overall with a time of 19:57.

Earlier, running in the Stop, Drop and Roll Classic—a 10K—Sterling finished first in the 40-49 age group and ended up fourth overall, posting a time of 41:38.

A few years ago, Sterling ran the 2020 Mississippi Blues Run, running the half-marathon, finishing third out of 60 in his age group and 23rd out of 956 overall.

Over the years, Sterling has entered all sorts of distance runs, recorded on his Facebook page, and, of course, has always taken part in local 5Ks held in his hometown.



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