

## **MIKE AUGUSTIN, BELLE HAVEN CC GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT, RECOGNIZED FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP**



Mike Augustin of Alexandria, VA has been recognized by the VGCSA as winner of the VGCSA Environmental Stewardship Award. The award is presented "in recognition of distinguished and meritorious service in the environmental stewardship of Virginia golf courses, and in grateful appreciation for unselfishly promoting the profession of golf course management, which led to the advancement of the association." Augustin is the Golf Course Superintendent at Belle Haven Country Club in Alexandria, situated alongside the Potomac River.

Augustin cultivated his interest in the game and entered the University of Maryland's turf program, graduating with a four-year degree in turf urban agronomy. His first internship on a golf course was as an assistant at Indian Spring Country Club in Silver Spring, MD working under Rhys Arthur. Then he became assistant at Bethesda Country Club under the legendary Dean Graves in Bethesda, MD. Graves was a great mentor and Augustin also learned to treat the golf course as if it were his own. After three years at Bethesda, he was ready for the top job at Belle Haven Country Club - he has been there for 21 years.

When your club sits in a flood plain on the Potomac River, with an adjacent highway carrying thousands of eyeballs daily, that's the definition of "pressure" for a Golf Course Superintendent. Augustin counters, "From day one, we had a mindset to be environmentally sensitive. You simply MUST do the right thing."

Marrying a commitment to environmental stewardship with the demand for superior golf course conditioning is not an easy task. Programs such as buffering ponds, tree removal and tree addition all contribute to ensure aesthetics, playability and responsible golf course management.

"Our goal is for water to leave our property cleaner than it entered," notes Augustin. He has a Storm Water Management Plan to capture runoff in buffers before entering the flood plain of the Potomac. Combine that with the natural filtering characteristics of turfgrass which absorbs nutrients, and you can achieve this goal. And of course - inputs are expensive - so applications are set conservatively.

In 2002, Belle Haven undertook a major golf course renovation. This included pond improvements which incorporated best management practices for pond management. All water drains into the ponds first, where they can treat, allow sediment to settle, and then the nutrients to be absorbed. Pond aerators keep fish healthy and deter surface algae. Quarterly water samples are a key tool in maintaining pond health. In fact, the Club agreed to keep extensive records as part of their water permit. The Club added a new pond at the clubhouse entrance as another environmental area. The Club's Horticulturist created floating wetlands, featuring irises and other wetland plants with roots extending into the pond's base. These floating wetlands help remove nutrients from the water which in turn helps mitigate unwanted nutrient release into nearby streams.

Like many courses, Belle Haven is prone to problems with Canadian geese. The Club's commitment to protecting wildlife often clashed with maintenance standards. Their humane solution was a combination of Border Collies and a laser light system that does not harm geese.

The Club is actually a haven for wildlife. American Bald eagles and ospreys patrol the trees adjacent to the Potomac. On any given day, you might see blue herons, eastern bluebirds, mallards, wood ducks, Asian ducks, red tail hawks, turkeys, deer, red fox, coyotes and more. Fish species include bass, bluegill, eels, carp and sunfish. Members may fish "catch and release" during non-golf times.

Augustin noted that the club has a special tree masterplan. During the course renovation, the Course Architect collaborated with an Arborist and added 1,500 trees. Now as trees are maturing, they are selectively removing weaker trees.

Green staff is trained to be responsible with defined areas of disposal of chemicals, being aware of buffer zones around water features. Staff is diligent to keep equipment clean and to eliminate unwanted discharge of leftover chemicals.

With Belle Haven's location on the Potomac River, pumping water sometimes becomes necessary, and they have to ensure it is clean water. "No one wants to be on the wrong side of their neighbors and community," said Augustin. "Our members expect our staff to be good stewards." Pesticides are not applied when there is a risk of runoff.

One truly unique feature of sustainability is the set of six beehives on the property. A local company is hired to tend to the hives, which produce honey used by the Club Chef and offered for sale in the Golf Shop. They started with just one hive, and the program grew. He notes the Club's commitment to pollinator protection.

The Club also has vegetable and herb gardens under Augustin's responsibility. The herb garden is near the clubhouse, so the Chef can easily access it and offer an organic menu.

The past few years, there has been a push from the board on creating a sounder recycling program in the clubhouse and with trash going out of the property. This has created a trickle-down effect in the membership and employees about being more responsible stewards of the environment.

When asked what the award means to him, Augustin remarked, "It is an honor. I'm surprised to receive an award like this, because it recognizes things we should all be doing or already do. This would not be possible without a great staff and supportive membership!"

(Article courtesy of the **Virginia Chapter, Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.**)