The Story of Aspen Tree 40 Years in the Making

By Ryan Davies

The stage was set in February 1976 in Freehold, NJ, a central Jersey town just west of the popular Jersey shore beaches. The man behind the dream was Stephen Chisholm Sr. accompanied by his wife and wing-lady Laura backing him 100%. The company is Aspen Tree Expert Co., Inc. and they have since set their roots in Jackson, NJ where they have been serving the tree care industry for 40 years through four generations. The Chisholm name is a familiar one to many arborists not just across New Jersey or even the country but around the world for many reasons.

Steve Chisholm Sr. is much more than President and Owner of Aspen. Outside of work he is a dedicated husband, father, grandfather, brother, uncle and active member of Jackson Baptist Church. As a boss he is a leader and a provider but most of all he is a friend and father figure to each of his employees. Steve followed in his father Larry Chisholm's footsteps and began climbing trees while in his teens and took a job with a line clearance company upon graduation from Monmouth Regional High School. He started in tree work as a young teen with his father and his friend who both worked as foreman for Asplundh and also had a small local tree company. Steve started working at Asplundh right out of high school and also worked at several other local tree care companies up until Aspen Tree was founded. After moving to Jackson in 1978, Steve was hired as supervisor for Freehold Township Shade Tree Commission where he worked from 1979 - 1986 while also working long hours to build his business. Steve has served, or is still serving with just about every tree care related organization, both in New Jersey and nationally. He has served as President of the Board of Certified Tree Experts from 1986 - present, Vice President Board of Certified Tree Experts 1984 - 1986, past President of NJ Chapter of International Society of Arboriculture, amongst countless more. In February 1976, Aspen was 3 men and maybe a couple of additional hands for bigger jobs in the busy season. With the successful run Aspen has had, Steve has too many memories to single out one to be the fondest. He is proud of his contributions to safety in the industry, serving with the TCIA Safety Committee that established the CTSP program and has served for many years on the ANSI Z133 helping to set the standards for tree care operations. “I am truly grateful for any success we have had, and I know that this success has been due in a large part to the many wonderful employees that have worked here in the past and present, many which became friends not just employees. Our success is not just ours, but theirs also. We have employees that have our same mindset, and want Aspen Tree to be successful and be the best we can be at what we do,” Steve said. Steve offered up some advice to any young arborist thinking of starting their own business. “Be prepared to work long hours and know that it will require dedication, hard work and sacrifice. I would encourage them to get involved in the industry, join the TCIA and ISA and they will be able to learn from others and make wonderful life long friends who they will also learn from. Always strive to do your best and everyone around you will also benefit from your success.”

As you would suspect, Laura Chisholm is the woman behind the scenes that holds it all together. They say behind every good man is a better woman and this saying holds true to
Steve and Laura Chisholm. Laura sees all her employees as her sons, worries just like any good mom but is strong and always there for her guys. Laura has been involved in the business from the very beginning. Being a supportive and loving wife she thought it would be a good idea for her to handle the secretarial and bookkeeping duties for the business, praying for the phone to ring and answering it when it did, scheduling estimates and paying the bills. Laura certainly isn’t afraid to get dirty herself. In the early years she had been known to work in the field when needed, dragging and chipping brush, running ropes and raking up. She even drove the bucket truck back then but never operated it or had the desire to climb. Her involvement with Aspen as the company grew led her to be interested in the knowledge of trees and the actual work, not just paperwork. Her husband encourage her to take classes at Rutgers University and pushed her to take the CTE exam. She is very proud that the Chisholm family was the first family with all four to become NJ Certified Tree Experts and all four named “NJ Arborist of the Year.” She is also an ISA Certified Arborist and has served on the Board of the NJ Shade Tree Federation. “Steve’s involvement became my involvement also. For example, when he volunteered to chair the New Jersey Tree Climbing Competition, then called the Arborist Jamboree, I became his assistant and I have been helping with the New Jersey competition ever since,” Laura said. Steve’s involvement with the ISA and the Board of Certified Tree Experts led to Laura’s involvement with the NJ Society of Certified Tree Experts where she has served as President of the Society for the past few years. “Like Steve, one of my greatest priorities is to see the implementation of the Tree Expert and Tree Care Operators Licensing Act that we all worked so hard to get passed. The betterment of the industry I love would be a great reward,” she added. 40 years of helping Aspen grow has been Laura’s life’s work. “I have been blessed, and I feel that the same God that gave me the love I have for my husband also gave me the love of his life’s work. We have worked together in all things, and our strengths have complimented each other to help our company become what we have tried hard to make it be. We have our sons help and involvement, and we have had a lot of great employees through the years that have contributed to our success. Hopefully it will be a legacy for our sons and their families for many future years.”

Stephen Chisholm Jr. is Aspen’s General Manager and handles the residential portion of the company as well as numerous administrative duties. His involvement in a number of Arboricultural organizations keeps him very busy and constantly giving back to the industry. His ridiculous wealth of tree knowledge has been passed on to many arborists through his teachings. The man is like a walking tree dictionary and if you happen to get him started on certain topics grab a coffee and get comfortable. Stephen holds many certifications that include New Jersey Approved Arborist, Committee for the Advancement of Arboriculture (CAA) First-Class Tree Climber, CAA Master Arborist, New Jersey Board Certified Tree Expert, and International Society of Arboriculture Certified Arborist amongst others. He has held numerous positions in tree care organizations. He is former President of the Arborist Association of New Jersey, former President of the NJ ISA and Society of Commercial Arboriculture. He is currently the Vice President of the NJ Society of Certified Tree Experts, Vice Chair of TREE Fund Liasion, Vice Chair ISA COR, and member of the ISA student committee. Stephen had his first few experiences on an Aspen job raking up job sites at age 10. It started to become routine at age 12 and then became almost every Saturday and most of the summer by age 13. The Chisholm family had a lawn service at the time as well and Stephen was with that crew most of the summer from 14 - 18 years old. He started climbing at age 15 and his younger brother Mark right after that at age 12. As Stephen approached college he decided to stay local and attend Ocean County Community College in Toms River New Jersey as he weighed his options between working for the family business or exploring other career opportunities. Shortly after attending OCC and getting married to his wife
Connie, Stephen decided to pursue the tree care industry more as a career and not just as the family business or a job. “I had a lot of influences locally that raised the bar here in New Jersey like Dave Shaw, Bill Porter, Harry Barker, Ken Gregory and my father. When I was exposed to some of the other icons of the industry outside of New Jersey and got the chance to work with or study under some of them like Dr. Shigo, that helped me strive for more,” Stephen said. His best Aspen memories are what he explains as too many regular days that just seemed like hell at the time, but turned out to be war stories. Outside of Aspen his favorite memories are ISA Work Days over the years, the National Day of Service at Arlington National Cemetery, teaching in Norway with his brother Mark and being at Dr. Alex Shigo’s last ever hands on workshop in New Hampshire before he retired and passed away. I asked Stephen what he believes the key to running a respectable and successful business is. “I think the key for me is to always expect the best from yourself and your people, and to never compromise on quality. I look back over all the customers that have asked us to do work that was not up to industry standards and I told them no. I eventually got good at persuading them to actually do the right thing. That for me has been very satisfying.”

Stephen Jr’s wife Connie is also a full time Aspen employee and has been for the past 19 years. She works in the office helping with administrative duties alongside her mother-in-law Laura. Prior to working for the family business she had a background in retail, sales, computers and admin responsibilities. When she had her twin girls Autumn and Holly she made the move to the family business. Autumn and Holly also work in the office and help out in the summers when they get a break from there collegiate studies. Both girls carry a heavy load in their junior years at Washington College as double majors, both finishing last semester with a 4.0 GPA so they are pretty impressive in their own rights. A perfect example of success breeds success. Connie is most proud of Aspen being a company that supports its employees and works hard to help with many other needs in the field of Arboriculture. “I often feel proud when I am at a conference or an event and someone recognizes my last name with a smile because of their association with Aspen in the past,” Connie said. When asked how Aspen has impacted the lives of her family she replied, “Sometimes seeing the hard work in action is what it takes to know how to proceed and succeed in life. It has been a good life lesson for my daughters.” Both Holly and Autumn Chisholm recall photos from family vacations always including pictures of interesting or poorly pruned trees. There is the occasional tree identification, and often a conversation about work at family outings. The girls are currently studying abroad in Paris so their involvement in Aspen’s future is yet to be confirmed or denied.

And then there’s the youngest of the Chisholm owners, Mark. Mark Chisholm is the Operations Manager, the face of the company and go to guy on most of the highly skilled more challenging projects but spends the majority of his time running the transmission line clearance division for First Energy, when he’s not traveling the world speaking or teaching at events and conferences. His awards and accolades speak for themselves and have allowed him great success and opportunity in the tree care industry that he is forever grateful for. He’s a special talent and remains the most humble and professional person you’ll ever come across. He’s laid back and not easily excitable and always willing to share his knowledge and passion for tree climbing. Mark is one of the most decorated and dedicated arborists in the business. He is a New Jersey Board Certified Tree Expert, ISA Certified Arborist, and ISA Certified Tree Worker to name a few. He was named the Arborist Association of New Jersey Arborist of the Year in 2000, the recipient of the Green Community Achievement Award by the NJ Forest Service in 2001, the 2010 Green Media “Most Influential People in the Green Industry, the 2013 Millard F Blair “Exceptional Contribution to Practical Arboriculture” winner, a 21 time ISA
New Jersey Chapter Tree Climbing Champion and a three-time International Tree Climbing Competition Champion. Mark has served as president of the NJAISA from 2012 - 2014 and holds a seat on the ISA ITCC Steering Committee. He considers himself being a part of Aspen since birth but officially started to learn how to climb at age 12. Always wanting to work in the business he attended OCC after high school and received an associates degree in liberal arts and then was accepted to Rutgers University for a biology major, but didn’t finish. He started getting very active in the tree care industry at that time and didn’t have his heart set on pursuing a degree. Some advice Mark would have for new climbers in the industry would be to mentally dedicate yourself to a career in arboriculture rather than a job no matter how long you plan to do it. Strive to be a professional at all times and never compromise your safety or integrity. When asked what he considers his greatest accomplishment Mark said, “I would have to say helping to share professionalism, and encouraging personal growth, and trying to instill a feeling of excitement about our industry in each and every person I’ve had the opportunity to meet. And I still try to shed a good light on who we are, what we do and the importance of quality tree care as well as trees in general to the public through media outlets and with the help of my professional relationships with STIHL, Teufelberger and Kask. As a kid he always hoped to be as good as his father. “He always says I have surpassed him in some ways, but I’m not too sure...” is Mark’s reply to that family debate. Mark’s fondest memories include competition and trade shows, climbing the world famous treehouse redwood tree with friends like Gerald Beranek, teaching in Italy every year for the past dozen years and working on historic properties like Augusta National Golf Course with friends from all over the country. The newest Chisholm family member to join Aspen is Mark’s stepson Ricky Durst. He has been with the company for 2 years and recently was introduced to the Plant Healthcare Division. He hopes to take over that part of the business when current 11 year Aspen veteran and plant health care specialist Paul Blejwas retires to his pottery business, Paul’s Pottery.

One of the international relationships Mark has made in the industry is with an Italian arborist and fellow Kask promoter Stefano Lorenzi of Arboriculture Stefano Lorenzi in Varese, Italy. The two were introduced in 2003 and have worked together annually ever since. In 2004 after a year of planning Stefano and former president of the Italian ISA Laura Gatti were able to introduce the first ISA Italy training course for 16 of the best Italian climbers with the help and guidance of Mark. The event was held in the marvelous park of Villa Cagnola in Varese, Italy. Stefano was asked by colleagues, “Why did you call an American? Why didn’t you call an Italian arborist? After the first throw of the throw line nobody said anything more,” Stefano recalled. Another of Mark's professional connections is Regina Costa, Arborist Market Manager at Teufelberger Fiber Rope. Gina describes Mark as genuine, kind, detail oriented and very helpful. He is innovative, always looking toward the future of Arboriculture and searching for solutions to create a safe and productive climbing / working environment. I asked Gina what she thinks the key to Aspen's success has been and she replied, “I think it is obvious that there is a reason that Aspen has been so successful for 40 years. With little turnover and employees that have remained at Aspen for decades, the Chisholm family as a whole is doing something right.” STIHL Inc. is a huge supporter of Mark and Aspen Tree. Mark has been a part of the STIHL family for many years now. Roger Phelps, Corporate Communications Manager at STIHL says, “As a communications professional I appreciate the ability to engage with an audience on a personal basis. Mark has that ability, whether the audience is one person, or several hundred. What I’ve been most impressed with is his integrity. Mark is not and never will be, a shill for anyone. Professionals in Arboriculture know that. And we can always count on Mark to tell us the absolute truth whether it is about the performance of a particular tool, or the needs of the industry. Anita Gambill, Business Event Specialist at STIHL has also had the
pleasure of working with Mark. The two first met at TCI Expo in Columbus Ohio in 2001. At that show STIHL’s first contact with Mark was made by the now director of marketing, Ken Waldron. Anita recalls, “As we left the local establishment after throwing some darts and playing pool, we passed another arborist on the sidewalk. The young man’s face lit up when he saw Mark and they greeted one another. I think that most everyone has likely experienced their face lighting up when they encounter Mark.”

I took time to speak to some of the men that have made careers here at Aspen. Kevin Kane, Supervisor of Sub Transmission line clearance has been with Aspen for the past 30 years. “Outside of friendship I haven’t seen another company or family I’d rather work for, I just like it here. I figured I started here I might as well finish here,” Kevin said when asked what’s kept him here all these years. Residential Supervisor and Salesman Rob Constantino has been with the company for 27 years. He attributes the longevity of his career to steady work, consistent advancement, the opportunity to work outside and continuing to learn new things even after 27 years. Rob’s best Aspen memory is when the Chisholm family took him and his wife to Wisconsin to the ITCC to watch Mark compete. Dave Ossowski has been employed by Aspen for the past 25 years and is one of Aspen’s three Certified Tree Safety Professionals. Dave has enjoyed seeing the company grow to where it is today as well as seeing Mark win three World Championships. Things like work days that show comradery in the industry have kept him in the business for 25 years. Joe Aufiero is one of the many NJ Board Certified Tree Experts on staff at Aspen. He was a previous Vice President of the NJ Society of Certified Tree Experts for 9 years and has been employed by Aspen for the past 15 years. Joe says that “Aspen is one of the rarest of personal relationships where you match social and business relations and it works.” Mike Villipart works for Aspen as a subcontractor on line clearance work for Jersey Central Power & Light and First Energy. He was employed by Aspen from 1991 - 1998 when he started Forever Green Tree Service in New Egypt New Jersey. I ask Mike what keeps him involved with Aspen and the Chisholm’s “They are my mentors. I have climbed next to Mark for years. They’re epic in their work and are cut from the same cloth as myself,” Mike said. He also added, “The fact that they were so involved in the industry and the things they have taught me gave me the confidence to spread my wings and go off on my own.” Billy Schaap a family friend and part time employee since 1984 says “Steve’s philosophy was always kind of neat. He will sit and have dinner with his employees not just be a timeless ruler.”

In a company that has grown to about 40 employees I also find it highly commendable that a handful of them have been with Aspen and the Chisholm family between 20 and 30 years. In an industry that sometimes catches a bad rap and good help is hard to come by, I think that speaks volumes about the operation they are running. Production and money are not the most important factors on a daily basis. Working safe and returning home to your family takes precedent overall, followed by providing a quality job to the customer. The Chisholm’s all share a passion for tree work and take pride in the education of their employees. They make sure everyone is properly trained and aware of the risks and hazards that accompany the occupation. No one is ever asked to perform tasks outside of their experience level or comfort zone. The Chisholm’s are motivated by their faith and love for the business. On behalf of the tree care industry and arborists around the world thank you for your contributions and dedication to the trade. Thank you for representing arboriculture with passion, pride, honesty and dignity. On behalf of your Aspen family thank you for the dedication to your staff and their families. Thank you for the opportunity you provide in making tree work a real life career option. And thank you for sticking to your roots and creating a professional family. To any aspiring young arborist or business owners I encourage you to make a visit to Jackson, NJ
and see how the Chisholm's do business. You will leave with the recipe for success. Keep up the good work Chisholm family and Aspen Tree. Cheers to the next 40 years!