

## **Sustainable Heroes Use Charitable Landscaping Powers to Help Those in Need**

*The organization, led by TV host and Landscape professional Ahmed Hassan, created a new outdoor landscape, edible garden and more for Interfaith Community Services in Escondido, California.*

*By: Scott McElroy, product training specialist, CASE Construction Equipment*

If this world has taught us anything it's that heroes come in all shapes and sizes. For some, that hero is Ahmed Hassan, an experienced landscaping expert and TV host who initially rose to fame hosting a variety of HGTV and DIY Network shows.

A California native, Hassan has collaborated and worked on several landscape and construction projects throughout the country. Many of those projects are the work of his new organization known as, "[Sustainable Heroes](#)." A freelance group of professionals including contractors, carpenters, landscapers, project managers, designers and more. The Heroes travel the country and choose humanitarian and sustainability projects where their charitable works will make a positive impact in the community.

The Sustainable Heroes team works solely from cash donations that go towards reimbursing much of their traveling and mobilization costs involved with shuffling some of the regular team members across the country. Each must donate their time. The lack of compensation is sometimes scary but it won't stop Hassan. He and his team considers their charitable projects an opportunity to passionately and compassionately pay it forward.

"It's a feel-good thing... It's different from any of the other work that I do, and I've done a lot of amazing makeovers, construction and landscaping," he says. "There's something different about giving your all and volunteering when there's no money involved. It's a different kind of appreciation; it's a different kind of drive. That's what it's been all about."

Whether it's helping a little girl living with cancer or creating a sustainable, edible landscape for those who are trying to get their lives back on track after difficult or traumatic life experiences, Hassan is inspired and prepared to do whatever it takes to assist with improving both residential and commercial spaces, as well as the socioeconomic landscape.

"The capacity to pay it forward is one of our greatest human talents," he says.

### **A Charitable Past**

Hassan is no stranger to charity work; he's been exposed to it his entire life. Growing up, his blended family routinely helped others in need. Whether it was through donations or taking folks into their home.

"It's not like we had any excess [of anything] growing up, but I remember my dad for a short time working at the homeless shelter. He was always trying to help somebody get their life together."

As he grew up and started his TV career, Hassan always knew and remembered where he came from and that his parents golden rule was, "Help people who are helping themselves." So when he received a paid offer to emcee and create a video while helping an organization called [Homes for our Troops](#), he jumped at the chance.

“That event impacted me in such an amazing way... It was a different energy than I had ever experienced. The volunteers doing these makeover landscape projects actually inspire me.”

Hassan says the seed was planted there.

A year later, he was approached again for a different kind of project and with no compensation. Creating a germ-free backyard for a two-year-old girl named Daniella, who was suffering from cancer. It was called, “Daniella’s Wish.”

Initially worried about the overall cost and the lack of a team, Hassan didn’t know how to make the project run successfully – but he knew he couldn’t back down from the opportunity to be of service.

Working with a close friend named Duane Draughon, an award-winning 3D and Outdoor Living designer, the pair traveled to Miami Springs to look at the site, meet with the family and figure out their game plan.

“I literally went out there with \$120 to my name; Duane had \$30. [I kept saying] don’t worry... We’ll make it happen,” Hassan says. “And we pulled it off! A nearly \$300,000 project on the other side of the country.”

He continues, “[We were successful] not because I’m the baddest landscaper or because he’s an award winning designer, but because we said yes, were committed, accountable and we pressed really hard to work within our industry in order to make it happen.”

“Bullock Garden was our second and smallest endeavor to date. It was however no less impactful. A low income elementary school garden, that was designed and constructed by Hassan’s team, local businesses in Glassboro NJ and some tenacious teachers that understand the importance of gardening and hands-on learning in a child’s curriculum. Again, the green Industry came through and the project was a success.”

### **Aster Gardens**

The Aster Gardens project was pitched by Interfaith Community Services of Escondido, Calif., an organization that addresses the needs of low-income, homeless and under-served people by providing tools, programs and resources for those in crisis and in the process of rebuilding their lives.

“Here’s an organization, and the tagline on their business card reads, ‘Helping people help themselves.’ I saw this and thought, okay, that lines up. They support women, children, veterans, seniors, the disabled, underprivileged, underserved people in our society? That lines up,” he says. “When it all lines up and feels right I think and sleep on it, then pitch it to my team. Once we say yes, it’s on! Then we bring together the troops and start canvassing the best brands in the green industry.”

The Aster Gardens project included creating a new outdoor living space, landscape, edible raised bed garden and hardscape design at the Aster Street Gardens transitional housing project.

“Aster Gardens was our largest project, and it was a huge footprint,” Hassan says. “I don't know what the exact square footage was, but it was huge. It was the biggest project I've ever been a part of managing as a makeover.”

In his typical “blitz-style” of makeovers, Hassan and his team spent a whirlwind five days working on the project: two days for preliminary construction, two volunteer days and a day of final details and cleanup.

They came up with a simple design – one that involved elements of sustainability. They added eight raised bed planter boxes for people to grow food in, salvaged the existing play structure, cleaned it up, and created a communal area with seating. The team also removed the pre-existing turf that covered the entire area with a large synthetic turf installation; cutting down on costly maintenance, water and fertilization costs.

[CASE Construction Equipment](#) donated a [CX75C SR hydraulic excavator](#), a TR320 compact track loader and a [TV380 compact track loader](#) to aid in the construction of the space. The machines assisted with the demo of plant materials and the placement of new trees and shrubs.

“Without CASE coming in as a heavy hitter with the equipment that we got delivered, it would have added another full week [to the project],” Hassan says. “There was no way we would have been able to affect that large of a footprint without those three pieces of equipment.”

### **The Future and Beyond**

Hassan knows his type of charity work can be both time-consuming, and mentally and physically draining. Working and designing for months on end, then getting all of the pieces together, in order to create the final product in as little as two days with volunteers is not for the faint of heart.

“I'm going to continue doing this extremely important work,” he says. “But I definitely want a break, and I told my team, ‘I think we're going to limit ourselves to two projects in 2016.’ In order for us to really be the Sustainable Heroes we say we are, we have to first sustain our own lives.”

As for the Sustainable Heroes' future, Hassan and the team hope to get set up as an actual 501(c)3 charitable organization. Allowing them to do fundraising, the bookkeeping and accounting internally.

But, regardless of their status, they plan to continue to take part in projects such as Aster Gardens, offering some good to each and every community wherever they can.

“We're figuring it out as we go. All of us have full time jobs, we all have other commitments and responsibilities,” Hassan says. “But this is something that we're all extremely passionate about, and it's happening. It's kind of mind blowing, but it's happening!”

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*To learn more about Sustainable Heroes, visit [sustainableheroes.org](https://sustainableheroes.org). To donate to the Aster Gardens project, visit <https://goo.gl/9fGafk> and select Aster Street Gardens project.*

*More details and project photos can be viewed by following the Aster Gardens project on Twitter (@STHeroesOrg) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/sustainableheroes/>) or via the #AsterGardens and #SustainableHeroes hashtags.*