

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

1/1/2020

An Extraordinary Industry

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

Ball Publishing's parent company had several big retirements of long-time employees last month, including Steve Blacksmith, Senior Business Manager in Supplier Relations, and Steve Cull, Director of Seed Operations. This column is about a third retiree, Mike Williams, Director of Human Resources, who's stepping aside, despite his relative youth (he's just 63), to make way for the next generation of HR leadership.

During his retirement speech, Mike said something that caught my ear and prompted this column: He called horticulture "an extraordinary industry." I agree, of course. But hearing it coming from someone who spent the first half of his career in another industry, I wanted to know why he thought so, so I cornered him in his office a few days later.

Mike spent his first 20 years in HR working for what he describes as "large, regional general merchandise chains. I think I counted 12 positions," he said of the number of jobs he held over that grueling, cut-throat period of his life. He didn't know that job number 13 would be the lucky one when he wrote a letter to Anna Ball inquiring if there were any positions open at her company. There was one—coincidentally, the HR director spot—which he took. He's been here ever since, hiring scores of Ball employees and mentoring scores more interns.

"I was more than pleasantly surprised that I turned this into the second half of my whole professional career. It wasn't what I was accustomed to," Mike admitted.

I asked Mike to expand on his use of the descriptor "extraordinary" to define our industry. He offered four reasons:

1. We produce "a real, meaningful product." People buy our flowers and plants because they enjoy them, not because they have to buy them out of necessity. This is a point I've always appreciated about horticulture—we provide products that make people happy. Not that the shoes, fashion and other consumer goods Mike's former industry sold don't make people happy ... but you rarely hear of elbows flying and wigs being torn off at garden center sales events. Plus, shoes don't provide the health, wellness and societal benefits of plants.
2. Strong relationships. "Where I came from," says Mike, "You don't have relationships. You have customers, you have suppliers and you transact business. But you don't have personal relationships." Mike told me he has come to greatly appreciate the relationships he has seen across the industry—supplier to grower, grower to retailer, retailer to consumer, competitor to competitor. He adds that it's not just a few people having strong relationships; it's

everybody in the industry, from the smallest to the largest.

3. Working and interacting with people from around the world. “We’re all engaged in the same industry, yet we go about our business in different ways,” Mike says. “Seeing different ways of doing the same business and interacting with people from different cultures, with unique business practices ... that to me has been so rewarding.”

4. “Genuinely good people.” Mike was frank when he described his old stomping grounds: “Competitors were your enemy. Suppliers were out to screw you. And that’s how everybody did business.” But the people in horticulture? “Extraordinary,” says Mike, using the word that started this topic. Who among you wouldn’t agree with that? The quality of the people is one of the top selling points of the plant business to job candidates and newbies.

Speaking of which, over Mike’s 20 years, he’s spent much time at university career fairs, communicating the value of the industry to young job seekers. I was curious what he considers selling points—besides those above—that are attractive to them. He offered these two:

- “Start with the product, which brings solutions to a lot of different problems in the world—aesthetics, health, productivity, climate change ... it’s certainly a product that coming generations can be proud to be involved with.”
- “The breadth of things you can do in this industry in terms of work runs the gamut—literally from salesperson to scientist and everything in between. The sky’s the limit. You can find a home doing just about anything in this industry.”

Mike, thanks for spending the last 20 years with us! We wish you the best in the next 20, and hopefully, the next 20 beyond that. **GT**