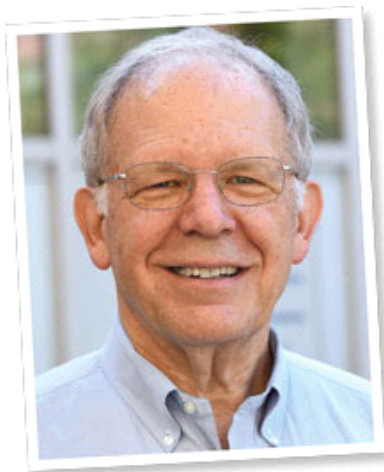


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“I’m Outta Here!”

Bill McCurry



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Gustav wasn't getting any younger. He asked his 12 children which of them wanted to take over growing potatoes and vegetables? Like many children raised on farms, not one of them wanted to get their hands dirty. Then in 1962, Gustav's daughter Elizabeth married Dietrich Kuhlmann, a German immigrant. They rented the land from Gustav, starting small and working hard. Both their daughters worked on the farm after school, weekends and summers. Anita, the youngest, remembers saying, "When I'm 18, I'm outta here!"

Her sister Angela says, "We worked alongside our parents and complained we had to do everything. We thought it wasn't fair. During high school, lots of kids our age were hired to work at Kuhlmann's. My parents made sure we had fun."

Both Anita and her sister married men who appreciated what a farm market/garden center work ethic was; men who enjoyed the variety of outdoor work. It's unusual to have multiple generations, including in-laws, successfully working together.

Anita believes the younger generation must understand owning a business means hard work, but also has benefits, including time to relax and renew. She and Angela each spend two winter months in Arizona at different times.

The Kuhlmanns have "secrets" for working together harmoniously.

Dietrich is the "buck stops here" CEO, but rarely says, "Do it my way." Major decisions are discussed at length before reaching a consensus.

Each family member's responsibilities are delineated and there's mutual respect. This prevents employee confusion. It holds family accountable. It lets family members take action knowing employees won't hear contradictory orders.

Elizabeth and Dietrich Kuhlmann are well known in Alberta, Canada, having helped start the Alberta Greenhouse Growers Association, a grower's co-operative, and other industry organizations.

Dietrich says:

- "I share what I've learned with anyone who needs it. Industry people who know things I don't know share with me. I

give time and knowledge to the community and it feeds back information, making me a better grower and businessman.”

- “You get a fresh start every year. Do something about it.”
- “The lunches are meeting of minds. We identify common goals and recognize abilities of younger generations. Kids see and understand our values.”
- “There’s only so much you can do with your own two hands. Imagine what (we) can do collectively!”
- “The key is selling it, not just growing it. Sell what customers want. Without demand, there are no sales.”
- “Daily targets excite the crew. Determining what to do stimulates them.”
- “Your family behind you means there’s strategic alliance and support when needed.”

Granddaughter Linda is the office manager and has taken over all the bookkeeping responsibilities from her grandmother.

Grandson Curtis is responsible for vegetable processing, including 4,000 to 5,000 jars of Mrs. Kuhlmann’s sauerkraut yearly. It was developed decades before when the cabbage heads split in the field and they couldn’t afford the loss. Curtis experiments with and develops whatever will benefit the company. Alberta’s short growing season makes it hard to homegrown peppers, so Curtis now pickles jalapeños, habaneros, Carolina Reapers, cayennes and others.

Customer comments and large quantity reorders energize Curtis. “Helpful fingers” reach into the new products as “taste testers.” The new pepper offerings bring in new customers, specifically younger customers open to unique tastes and those from cultures accustomed to spicier foods. The initial purchases are small. The re-purchases are multiple jars.

The entire Kuhlmann family knows it must step back. Look around. And never say, “This is how we’ve always done it.” **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.