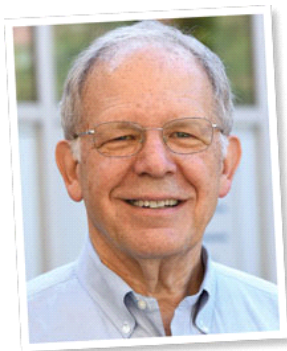


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## Someone Smarter Than You

*Bill McCurry*



*Bill McCurry*

"Always hire someone smarter than you and learn from them," Rodney Stoutenger's mother and grandmother told him.

Rodney "wasn't challenged" in high school and felt he was wasting his time. He dropped out at 14 and got his first job.

"When you're a young kid, sitting still for three months seems like a lifetime," he said. "I observed good bosses and bad bosses. I saw the 'my-way-or-the-highway' boss stifle employees' creativity. I knew I needed the team's input to grow a business where it could and should go."

In 2008, 19-year-old Rodney knew what kind of boss he wanted to be, cashed his last paycheck as an employee and, with \$800, started his landscape business, Native Edge.

The business grew with repeat and referral customers. By 2017, Rodney and team were ready to open a garden center where customers could embrace plants and nature. The team wanted to aggressively support community events, local organizations and non-profits.

In early 2020, they found a central Austin, Texas, location. Today, Garden Seventeen is a testament to the power of Rodney listening to his team, imagination, hard work and love of nature. Whether you're a seasoned gardener or simply looking for a peaceful retreat from city life, Garden Seventeen is the perfect place to relax, connect with nature and find inspiration in natural beauty.

Despite COVID delays, Garden Seventeen opened thanks to help from vendors, employees and the community. The costs were higher than anticipated and product availability challenging, causing lower sales than envisioned.

February 2021 brought the Great Texas Freeze. The electric utility "voluntarily" rotated blackouts, but couldn't promptly restore the power. For four days Garden Seventeen's greenhouses' temperature was 14 degrees Fahrenheit. The dead inventory exceeded \$65,000. The expense of acquiring and rushing replacement product added unforeseen costs. The insurance company and Rodney's attorney said because the power company turned off power "voluntarily" it wasn't an insured loss. Sorry.

The year 2022 was okay, but the impact on cash flow was still being felt. Garden Seventeen was burglarized FOUR times in January. The thief extensively damaged the facilities, disrupting inventory levels by taking all of some categories.

As of March 30, insurance hadn't yet paid the burglary claims. This—added to the prior events—has created a significant cash crunch, impacting inventory.

The team rallied around and implemented ideas to manage their future. Some garden centers have appealed on GoFundMe for help overcoming rapidly accelerating rents. The team felt if the community can't—or won't—support them, they shouldn't be there. In a heartfelt Facebook video to his customers, Rodney shared this statistic: New businesses that survive the first five years will continue beyond 50 years. Garden Seventeen is just three years old.

"To ask for a donation to overcome rent costs doesn't solve anything long term. Either the community supports us or it doesn't," he said.

In the video, Rodney shared his vision to make Garden Seventeen a calming, serene part of the local community. He asked those who want to see the store continue to support it in these ways:

- Share our name and brand with everyone you know.
- Bring your friends shopping with you so they can see why you like us.
- Post pictures and stories online about your plant purchase from us.
- Buy our merch, including T-shirts. We give a lifetime 5% discount to everyone wearing our T-shirts when they shop.
- Buy gift cards now for future use.
- Book events or private classes.

Rodney ends his video with, "We've shared how you can help us. More important, how can we help you? Tell us how we can improve, what products we should stock, and how we can make your visits even more fun and relaxing."

The immediate response was overwhelming. Rodney and his 70 employees realize they aren't alone. They're providing key benefits and their community reciprocates because they understand how to support Garden Seventeen. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 731-8389.*