

Friends in Growin' Places

"Friends in Growin' Places" is the theme for this year's annual OAN Convention. The name takes a famous Garth Brooks song title, "Friends in Low Places," and gives it a playful twist.

It may be heresy to some, but I am not a fan of country music. However, the theme captures the notion of friendship and the renewed growth of our industry, so we went with it. Nurseries are, after all, growing places — places where plants as well as people can grow.

At a recent board meeting, OAN volunteer leaders were talking about the annual convention — the issues, the fundraising necessary to put on the event, and what it meant to them.

Kyle Fessler, who joined the board this year, jokingly jabbed Mark Bigej for being responsible for how he turned out as an adult. You see, both attended convention years ago. Back then, Mark was in high school and was in charge of the kids. Kyle was one of the children under Mark's care.

It's a small world, but it changes quickly. Now both Mark and Kyle are serving the industry as leaders — multi-generation leaders with fathers who served as presidents of the association. The green industry is in their blood, and so is service.

Those are the fires we hope to stoke in 2015.

It's about family

I asked a random selection of members, both new and seasoned, what they personally want out of convention. Strong common threads emerged.

The nursery industry is a tight-knit community. For many, convention is an opportunity to bring families and have them get to know each other. So many stories over the years include how many grew up with convention being a big part of their life.

For me, the nursery community immediately embraced my entire family — including daughters who were 4 and 6 at the time. These certified city girls have grown before my eyes into young women who have a deep affection for the families that comprise our industry.

For example, my youngest had to cancel her 10th birthday party because convention was scheduled at the same time. Not only did many of the titans of the industry know it was her birthday, they made it special. My daughter was grinning ear to ear as birthday greetings surrounded her.

That is why it's critical we bring families back to the convention experience.

It's about networking

One member told me he values the special connection each company has with another company. It is unique to our industry.

For others, convention is the top social occasion — the biggest party of the year. It's where members share their passion for the industry as well as their off-the-charts knowledge on production and retail. And for quite a few, it's the opportunity for young and old members to break bread (or imbibe some beer) and get to know each other in a setting that is not overly regimented.

Working in the industry is a great equalizer. People respect

what you grow and sell, as well as your sheer determination to succeed. At convention, we share growing tips, discuss human resource challenges and strategies, talk sales ideas and even lament failures with humor.

Every year, the industry gets the opportunity to get back to it and get it right. Convention is where that starts.

It's about celebrating

Convention is also a time and place to celebrate the end of the growing season. We honor the commitment of volunteer leaders, the many contributions by industry members both old and new, and our togetherness as an association that is diverse in its geography as well as its production methods.

I believe our industry is ready to celebrate again; to believe again in the promise of the next year; to go to a destination spot — in this case, Eagle Crest in beautiful Central Oregon — and kick the dirt off the shoes, raise a toast and tell stories. Particularly, any conversation that begins, "Hey, do you remember that story with Zielinski, Wells and Coulter ..."

There is no reason to not create new memories and bask in the enjoyment of each other's company.

It's about giving thanks

At the OAN Convention, peers engage with peers. We talk about the great challenges facing the industry, including water, labor, environmental regulations and market dynamics. We also hear directly from those who take time from their businesses to lead the association.

We have been blessed with steady leadership during turbulent and troubling times. The OAN has utilized convention to talk about issues that bind us — and divide us — to promote the notion that good ideas still are one of our most precious commodities.

Challenges can cripple an industry and quickly impact a single operation. But through shared strength, we prevail.

Our leaders represent a wide array of interests — large and small growers, retailers, greenhouse and Christmas tree operators as well as the many allied businesses that support the industry. It requires a unique blend of vision, savvy and balance to lead an association, and we should publicly demonstrate our appreciation.

The President's Awards Banquet is the mountaintop of the convention experience, where we recognize the many contributions of our stellar membership. We recognize up-and-coming nursery professionals as well as those who have dedicated decades of service to the betterment of the industry.

Convention is special. It is worth being a part of. I hope you join us November 13–14 at Eagle Crest Resort! ☺



By Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Stone'.