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Learning outside the box

Happy New Year! What a fun time of year it is. We got to see family and friends over the holiday season, and now it's time to start focusing on spring again, which means the busy season is just around the corner. I can't wait!



Mark Bigej
OAN PRESIDENT

One of the best things about starting a new year is feeling refreshed and starting to think about new ideas and plans. As I am getting ready to send my oldest son back to college, I'm reminded of an ingenious idea my dad had when I was growing up. Of course, I didn't really think it was all that great at the time, but with age comes wisdom, and perhaps a little different perspective.

When I was 6, my dad had the foresight to understand that college isn't cheap. I'm learning this lesson now — ouch! I know this isn't earth-shattering news to anyone, but what my mom and dad did with this realization was different than most people I know — they acted on it!

Being the entrepreneur my dad is, he came up with a clever plan to start a small container nursery separate from the retail garden center he was already running. What made this nursery different, though, was the business model he had for the nursery. We all know labor is our greatest expense, and he had a plan to control that expense to the extreme. Can you imagine running a nursery with NO labor costs? His brilliant scheme entailed making my mom, my three older sisters and me the sole workers!

Here's how it went: Mom was the leader of a workforce that consisted of three daughters ages 12, 10 and 8, plus a son at a whopping 6 years of age. We started small with planting only a few thousand 1-gallons the first year. We learned how to root our own cuttings, plant, trim, weed, space, fertilize, shift up, load trucks and deliver the products.

Over the next several years, we grew more plants than my dad could sell at his store alone, so we started wholesaling product to local nurseries. Each of us kids had our turn at being responsible for the checkbook, which meant we also got a lesson in finances. When it was all said and done, The Little Big E Nursery, as we called it, had paid for college (with the help of scholarships) for all four of us children.

We all got to go to the college of our choice, and none of us came out with a single school loan. Like I said — ingenious!

What was learned out in that can yard, however, was probably more impressive to me than the fact that we all paid for our college educations. While we didn't like it at the time, my sisters and I learned how to work, and we learned that hard work is rewarded. We gained confidence as productive parts of our family, we learned how to critically think and problem solve, and we learned how to work together through good and bad times.

Those lessons have had a tremendous impact during my lifetime, and they still benefit each of us to this day. It was an education Mom and Dad gave us that went far above and beyond what we ever learned in school.

Mom and Dad were thinking outside the box of the traditional investments and college savings plans, and they hit a home run!

As you make your plans for the New Year, I hope you too can think outside the boundaries of conventional wisdom and come up with an idea that returns far more than you ever thought possible. ☺