

The Billy Joe Miles We Knew

November 30, 2014

One would have to look long and hard to find a better example of success, vision, dependability and filling the customer's needs than Billy Joe Miles. As Susan and I have travelled around the country over the years, Billy Joe's name is synonymous with Owensboro, Kentucky. We've often told the people we meet that Billy Joe entertains more new ideas in a month than the typical person encounters in a lifetime.

I had the privilege to join Big Rivers Agri Supply in 1984, being hired right off the farm by Vince Hayden and Paul Coomes. Equipped with only a good reputation and work ethic, working with the Miles family of companies provided a very fertile and diverse experience that has influenced practically every business decision since. You don't have to work at Miles long to figure out that your job is to do whatever has to be done - a requirement that stems from the farm and works to spark successful teamwork and an entrepreneurial spirit. I remember seeing Billy Joe performing jobs that could have been delegated to an employee, but never the less, he lived the fact that he was never above joining the rest of the employees in doing what was needed.

In looking back at what influences working for Billy Joe and the Miles family had on our success is best described in a few of our fond memories.

A die-hard prankster, Billy Joe was known for having some fun with a new employee that came to work for him, but may have never had the opportunity to meet him yet. Stories are plentiful where he would stop in at one of the retail locations posing as a customer that couldn't pay his bill, but needed to buy something on credit. Sometimes he got it, sometimes he didn't, but he always had fun trying and the lesson he provided time and again was the importance of enjoying what you do.

Billy Joe was the first person to introduce Para Plows in the U.S. and as a result I wore out a pickup truck pulling one around and demonstrating it. One rainy Saturday afternoon I was picking up a new Para Plow. In trying to get out of the rain so I could chain the load onto the trailer, I backed under a canopy and accidentally through a roll-up door. I didn't just scrape it or anything, I basically took the bottom few sections completely off. I gathered enough courage to go over to Billy Joe's house to tell him what I did praying all the way that he wouldn't be home. Just my luck, he answered the door and I told him what I had done. His reply was not to worry about it and thanked me for working on the weekend - something that he said he knew I did a lot of.

The only time that I truly caught Billy Joe by surprise was when I arrived at Grace's headquarters in New Albany, IN with donuts for the employees one morning - before Billy Joe, himself arrived. I had been there about ten minutes before he arrived for one of his famous confidential meetings. I was there to try to sell them something and unbeknownst to me he was there to buy the company. I'm not sure who was the most surprised, Billy Joe, John Oster with W. R. Grace or myself.

In case you never had the opportunity to meet the real Billy Joe, he is a kind man that would give the shirt off his back to help you, if you needed it. The kind of man that on Christmas afternoon would climb into a propane truck and fill the tanks of customers he knew were down on their luck and was having a hard time making ends meet through the winter. I never met a man more generous, or private about things like this. I'm sure the only person that knows the extent of his generosity is Billy Joe himself.

I learned so much over the years from watching Billy Joe, Vince and Paul interact with employees, customers, suppliers and others that it is hard to put it in words. "Doing the right thing" was a central theme throughout the conversations I was privy to. Having a front row seat at the tables for these sometime spirited meetings was priceless and has served to provide the proper mix of creativity, strength and thought process over the past 25 years.

The fall of 1989 was an exciting time as Susan and I were blessed with the birth of our first child, Paul. It was not exactly the best time to quit a good job at Big Rivers without another position, but as the role of the distributor of agricultural chemicals changed, so did the satisfaction of the position. I wore many hats in my job at Big Rivers, and I loved every one of them. Time had come to move on, hard as it was. I learned so much from Billy Joe, Vince and Paul over the years and their influence can be seen in our business on a daily basis. I'll never forget sitting down with Billy Joe on my last day there and thanking him for the opportunity he had given me. Most memorable was Billy Joe's prediction that I would go on to "something on my own that involved a lot of detail, documentation and responsibility." Looking back, his ability to see what was coming was much better than anyone else's around, including my own. Classic Billy Joe!

Most successful companies are the result of a great idea followed by endless planning. Our story at Asmark isn't really one of those stories. It's simply one of hard work, innovation and responding to our client's needs, much as Billy Joe did in his business and predicted for us. To imply in any way that we set out to create and develop what the Asmark Institute is today, would be inaccurate. To fully understand our success, one has to understand where Susan and I came from and how the journey working for Billy Joe, Vince and Paul influenced our success over the past 25 years.

Thank you Billy Joe!

Allen & Susan Summers