

## **Cultivating Community, *Not Just Cash***

*by Geryll Zehr*

When Jacob Nisley started JN Pallet, located in Conneautville, Pennsylvania, in 1985, he did so with the purpose of growing a family business which would provide not just a means of livelihood but a place where his three boys could engage their skills and energies in a dynamic, growing environment. His vision for his business grew out of his values and enabled it to become an extension of his desires for his family and community. JN Pallet was conceived as more than just a money-making endeavor; it was a way to bless others with a means of livelihood and a warm, family-friendly setting—a tradition which is now carried forward by the second generation.

Although Jacob Nisley initially looked at other types of business, pallet manufacturing was the most feasible because of the local abundance of raw materials and his location in the tri-state area, close to Ohio and New York. He reached out to pallet makers from other conservative communities to get advice and startup information. Although one broker wanted most of the fledgling business's product in exchange for startup assistance, Jacob resisted the danger of being too dependent on one customer, and began cultivating relationships with a variety of brokers.

"When Dad started JN Pallet, it was the first Amish/Mennonite pallet shop in the area," says John Nisley. "There weren't a lot of opportunities for employment in the immediate area, and the economy was just pulling out of a recession. Unbeknownst to us the timing was perfect for starting a business." The early years were "good, but tough." The whole family worked together to get the endeavor off the ground. "Everything Dad started with was either leased or borrowed," comments John. "He started with the resources he had and built the business in small steps."

The boys—John, David, and James—recall some of the challenges of beginning a business: "We younger boys, James and I, would be at home taking care of the farm chores while Dad and John would be working at the pallet shop," says David. "The burden of work was frustrating sometimes." Nevertheless, Jacob involved his boys in the business in a way which drew out their unique skills and gifts, a reality which is evidenced by the fact that he brought all his boys in as partners in 1997.

For many businesses, the goal of family unity and mutual gain and enjoyment remains only a dream. For the Nisley family, however, JN Pallet became a unifying and energizing enterprise. "We certainly don't agree on everything, and tempers have been known to flare sometimes," John points out. "But by focusing on the strengths each individual brings to the table, rather than potential negatives, the business is enhanced and improved."

Community remains an important aspect of the vision of the business. A majority of the employees live in the immediate area—near enough to walk or bike to work—and are given a

lot of flexibility to take off for family or community events. “We are willing to sacrifice some things for the sake of our employees, even to the point of giving up some production if we need to so that they can take off when it is important to them,” James comments. “We do our best to cultivate good relationships and serve their needs.”

Jacob also expressed his commitment to serving others by helping another conservative businessman in the area start a pallet shop—even though it could have meant increasing competition. “I remember we went to his house, sat at his kitchen table, and showed him the method we used to quote pallet jobs,” John says. “It was counter-intuitive to regular business practice. But that’s just how Dad was.” As a result of this early relationship, this man was careful not to compete directly against JN Pallet, even if it meant he had to turn down work at times. As the business grew in the period from 1985 to 1993, it began to outgrow the supply of blocking (the heartwood left over from sawing hardwoods) available from sawmills. So in 1993, Jacob and the three boys installed a scrag mill on the property to process “poles” or pulpwood logs which could be sawed into blocking for the pallets. Although this process was slightly less cost effective than buying blocking, it allowed increased production in the pallet building shop. The scrag mill was owned as a partnership between Dad and the three boys, and run as a separate business until 1997, when the entire operation was created as a four-way partnership.

Throughout this process, Jacob continued to pursue his goal of transitioning business operations to the management of his boys. “Dad was never a whipcracking sort of person,” John explains. “But he was serious about his business and consistent in his work ethic. He taught us by example.” One of the unique ways that Jacob communicated the value of customer service was by encouraging the practice of answering phones immediately and discouraging the use of voicemail. Such seemingly small procedures serve to emphasize the need to deliver excellent business service, offered out of integrity and a heart to give. “We try to put the needs of costumers first, even if they call in unnecessarily angry,” John concludes. “A soft answer turns away wrath.”

At seventy-three, although semi-retired, Jacob remains active in the business operations of JN Pallet, and continues to serve as an advisor and coach to his family and others. John, David, and James continue to carry on the values of family and community service which have come to define the business.

---

*Geryll Zehr is a business owner and Managing Editor of Stewardship Connections.*