

# Blessing (IN DISGUISE)

*Getting fired was a painful—  
but crucial—step that  
led to successful  
entrepreneurship.*



For most people, getting laid off from their job is about the worst thing they can imagine. Looking back, Brian Kirksey says, “It was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was a blessing in disguise.”

Not that Brian was all that thrilled that fall day in 1985 when he got his walking papers from Reynolds Manufacturing in Arkadelphia, Arkansas.

“It was a low point in my life,” he concedes. But having been handed a lemon, he and Nan, his bride of three years, decided to make lemonade. They invested their life savings of \$10,000 to build a second greenhouse next to the little farm house where they lived—and where Brian had been raised.

“It was a step of faith,” Nan adds. “But we were young and optimistic.”

Using the cash flow generated by one greenhouse to build

another, the young couple kept expanding. Now they have 21 greenhouses, 300 acres of land in pasture and timber and 50 Brangus cows near Lake De Gray, 6 miles outside of tiny Amity in southwestern Arkansas.

“Growing up, my dream always was to own a couple of hundred acres and run some cows,” Brian recalls. “I worked for a nursery in Amity when I was in high school. But it never occurred to me that the nursery business would be my way to get back into farming.”

As he talks, Brian looks out the windows of the living room of the Kirksey’s sprawling ranch-style home. He can see the rolling ridges of the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains looming barely 30 miles away. Off to the side, brilliant sunlight bounces blindingly off the reflective plastic of the long rows of greenhouses. Rimming lush green pastures of Coastal

STORY BY DEL DETERLING / PHOTOS BY BOB SHULL



*The family produces landscape plants and bush fruits in 21 greenhouses.*

bermuda and bahiagrass are towering stands of stately pines and leafy oaks.

His great-great-grandfather settled here on 900 acres in the 1870s. Brian owns 60 of the original acres; his father and brother also own 60 acres of the old farm. Just down the driveway, where two country roads intersect, stands the old general store that his great-grandfather and grandfather maintained up until the depression days. Now Brian and his

brother use it to store hay. The old cotton gin and sawmill are long gone.

Brian and Nan both graduated from Henderson State University in Arkadelphia. Nan works three days a week as an early childhood special education teacher. They have two children—Kathryn, 20, a nursing student, and John, 14.

Losing his job was not a total shock to Brian. As the economy started to tank in 1985, his father, also a Reynolds

## (RECYCLING TO SAVE)

For years, Kirksey struggled to find the best way to dispose of the old polyester covering from his greenhouses when it needed to be replaced.

“Then, one day, it occurred to me that we could use the material to cover our round hay bales in the field,” he reports. “I lay the sheets on the ground, stack the bales on top, then wrap the plastic across

the top. It protects them from spoilage.

“We also have a re-use program with retail customers to encourage them to have their buyers return the plastic containers that the plants come in,” Kirksey adds. “We give the retailers free plants as an incentive. It saves us money to be able to re-use the containers and it’s good for the environment.”



# (PRIZE-WINNING PROGRAM)

Brian Kirksey's story from near down-and-out to successful entrepreneurship earned him the designation of 2008 Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year. Among other prizes, the award gave him one-year's free use of a Massey Ferguson MF5445 tractor with Dyna-4™ electro-hydraulic powershift transmission and front-end loader.

"We took delivery Christmas Eve 2008. It was a great Christmas gift," Brian says.

The tractor joined an older MF231S with a loader that he's had for a number of years.

"Among other things, the judges were impressed how we try to be self-sufficient and careful with our spending," Nan says. "We started with nothing and always were careful whenever we expanded."



Manufacturing employee, told him, "Son, you better find a way to create some cash flow if you plan to stay on the farm," Brian recalls.

"I already had built the first greenhouse the previous spring," Brian says. "East Nursery, which I had worked for in Amity, gave us our first contract for 50,000 one-gallon plants. That got us off the ground. We built the second facility in 1986.

"For the next 10 years, I built greenhouses for people all over Arkansas and in surrounding states. I also supplied them with plant material," he says. "I used the profits to expand our own operations."

Each of the houses is 30 feet wide and 100 to 150 feet long. Brian bends 1½-inch electrical conduit into a large horseshoe shape to form a Quonset-type structure, then covers it with a durable woven polyester-nylon cloth that lets sunlight penetrate.

At first, the Kirkseys grew ornamental plants and landscape—primarily azaleas and hollies. In recent years, they have added blueberries, blackberries and figs.

"I market primarily to small retail outlets in Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma, although we broker plants as far away as Oregon," Brian reports. "We e-mail our price lists

and deliver in our own trucks. We have developed a good reputation for quality over the years, so we tend to keep our customers.

"I like to handle my own deliveries, because I want to stay in direct touch with my customers to make sure they are satisfied," he says.

The nursery business is a year-round operation. Most plants are shipped January through May and again September through November. But the greenhouses constantly have to be refilled and plants fed and watered. Brian generally hires two

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fulltime workers—up to five during peak periods. His mom helps out with watering and answering the telephone. Nan answers the phone during the busy season. John also helps with feeding cattle and watering and loading plants.

"Looking back, we can see the subtle hand of God at work blessing our lives," Brian says. "Sometimes when life seems the darkest, it just means the dawning of a new day." ■



*The farm is a dream come true for Brian, his wife Nan, daughter Kathryn and son John.*