

# Be a mentor — make a difference

Most of us have had some kind of mentor — a teacher, coach, boss or family member — who made an impact on our lives. A person who asked a lot of us, demanded accountability and provided critical guidance.

I don't believe mentors set examples because it is expected of them, or because they want the credit. They do it because they see human potential and decide to act.

I have had the great fortune to have two significant mentors so far in my life. Each one helped define me as a person — then and now.

## A coach and a senator

During a 45-year criminal defense career, Eugene attorney Ken Morrow took on controversial cases and compiled a stunning record for acquittals. He was one of the finest in his field. In his spare time, he also coached youth football, and there he was a titan.

In sixth grade, he cut me from the team. He told me later that he watched carefully to see what my reaction would be. Would I have a bad attitude or would I play harder? I was brought back and did my part to secure a city championship and an undefeated season.

Coach Morrow taught me a lot about hard work, perseverance, trusting teammates and being accountable. When I would see him from that time until his death, he would show enormous interest in what I was doing now. He was ever mindful that I should do for others as others had done for me.

At his funeral, all former players were asked to stand. Dozens did. They ranged in age from 12 to older than 40, all of them proof that his 35 years of coaching and mentoring amounted to more than just a 256–33 win-loss record.

It's still inspiring to consider the impact he had on me and countless others.

U.S. Sen. Bob Packwood also taught me many lessons over the years. One was that you can forgive an error in judgment, but never one in fact.

At every phase of my life, both personal and professional, the senator has been a wise counselor. Certainly the loyalty goes both ways, but the senator has been a mentor and guide throughout my nearly 30-year career. Sometimes he offers thoughts; most times he listens and gives a nudge here and there.

Both of my mentors did not shy away from controversy; they hit issues head on. But most importantly, they guided me to deploy the lessons of hard work, determination and trust. These became my personal cornerstones.

## American farmers are aging out

In our business, mentors are becoming more important than ever. Why? Because time is ticking on today's generation of American farmers. Many do not have children who are interested and willing to continue the family farm.

Between 2002 and 2007, the number of American farm-

ers and ranchers 65 and older grew by 22 percent. During the same time period, the number of farmers 45 or younger fell by 14 percent.

In our state, we have several multi-generational farms, but they are not the trend. The average age of an Oregon farmer is just shy of 60 years old. I'll repeat that: the average.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and many prominent natural resource organizations are growing quite concerned over these trends. There is a growing knowledge gap between growers who have "been there, done that" and new, emerging operators who face a much different economic climate than their predecessors.

These are big challenges, but the answer is right in front of us. We need mentors who are willing to impart their knowledge and wisdom to others.

Mentorship can be approached in a variety of ways: peer-to-peer mentorship, informal information sharing, and common problem solving. Mentors may serve as confidants who become a sounding board to help resolve doubts, frustrations and challenges.

These mentors, no matter their form, must be trustworthy. They must connect and be available. The younger generation, meanwhile, must seek out mentors and be willing to explore the hard issues and learn difficult lessons.

At heart, the mentor-mentee relationship should be a two-way street. Both must give. And both must gain.



**By Jeff Stone**  
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## Making connections

Trade associations can serve as a conduit for experienced and emerging nursery industry members to interact and learn from one another.

At this past year's Farwest Trade Show, a band of young nursery professionals — led by brothers Josh and Chris Robinson of Robinson Nursery — joined a national movement called "Emergent: A Group for Growing Professionals." Mentorship is a key component of this effort, and I hope it spreads to all the trade shows produced by the industry.

In addition, OAN's chapters are looking at re-engagement of their membership. They're seeking ways to bridge gaps and pass on institutional industry knowledge.

If you are looking for a mentor, don't delay. Take the risk and approach someone. If you need a mentee, look around. You may be one already and just never called it by that name.

For those who are in the twilight of their nursery career, look to open up your experience and pass it on. At the intersection of this two-way street, our industry will get stronger and thrive into the future. ☺

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J Stone".