



Up and comers

Trystan Lewis (left) and Elizabeth Brentano founded NexGen to help connect those new to the industry and those who are up and coming in the industry. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

NexGen and its founders seize opportunity to help those new to the industry

BY VIC PANICHKUL

THE SCRAMBLE OF BOWLING PINS after being stuck by the ball, the barrage of golf balls flying from three levels of hitting bays at Topgolf — these aren't the usual sight and sounds of a nursery gathering.

But these aren't your run-of-the-mill nursery meetings. They are NexGen events.

Elizabeth Brentano, production and shipping assistant at **Robinson Nursery Inc.** in McMinnville, Oregon, and Trystan Lewis, assistant production manager at **JLPN Inc.** in Salem, Oregon, started NexGen to connect new and up-and-coming people in any role in the nursery industry as well as ancillary industries.

When they were brainstorming names for the group, they were careful about word choice. "We didn't want to connect

with age ... to use the word 'young' ... because a lot of people enter the nursery profession later in life," Brentano said. But the person who gets credit for coming up with the name NexGen is Lewis' father, who suggested it in a marathon email brainstorming exchange.

Brentano, 24, daughter of **Brentano's Tree Farm** owners Pete and Wendy Brentano, and Lewis, 20, son of JLPN owners John and Crystal Lewis, met at a Lean conference. Brentano's boss, Josh Robinson, was involved in the Emergent nursery networking group, and John Lewis and Robinson encouraged the duo to start an Oregon group and make it their own.

Both founders grew up in the business.

"I loved growing up at the nursery," Brentano said. "A fond memory is getting to sit shotgun in the box truck when my dad drove to pick up an order of trees.

"I started working full time for the family farm and nursery during summer breaks when I was about 12 years old. Back then, it was a lot of suckering and pruning,

and I didn't love the labor. By the time I graduated high school, I decided to attend Oregon State University to get an animal science degree and become a large animal veterinarian," she said. "It took until my junior year at OSU where I finally admitted that I didn't want to be on call for sick animals on Christmas morning, and I would rather be a part of the family business."

Lewis made the same choice. "Growing up at the nursery was the best experience of my youth," he said. "It was my childhood dream to work at the nursery full time and take over the business from my parents. I was never a fan of school growing up, so once I graduated high school, I wanted to pursue my childhood dream."

Meeting a need

Starting out in the industry can be an isolating experience, Brentano found.

"I graduated from OSU [Oregon State University] in 2021. The last one-and-a-half years of it was during Covid-19 so it was Zoom lectures with no personal interaction," Brentano said. "I had trouble >>>

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NexGen hosted its third meeting in 2023 at TopGolf in Hillsboro. The group's leaders focused on creating fun and inviting events to get as many people to attend as possible. TOP PHOTO BY ELIZABETH BRENTANO BOTTOM PHOTO BY DALTON DUNN

meeting people my age, or in a similar point in their career as me. I felt like there was a need to let everyone know that there are other people out there like them.”

Lewis had a similar experience. “It’s hard for people to visit a nursery and meet someone and try get to know each other, especially production workers,” he said. “Everyone’s so busy.”

Brentano and Lewis started the conversation about starting NexGen in 2022. They spent the winter working on plans to host their first event, a bowling party at Bullwinkles, in Wilsonville, Oregon, in June of 2023. About 25 people attended. The duo planned three more events, a picnic in August at Silver Falls State Park, a gathering in October at Topgolf in Hillsboro and a holiday party at the beginning of December.

“I would say that when we first started having events with the NexGen group, we really wanted to make sure it was simply fun and inviting, so that we could get as many people out as possible” and let them make connections, Brentano said.

That approach proved fruitful for the fledgling group.

Creating a social network

“I wanted to connect with people of

my own age in the industry,” said Henry Golb, 23, a horticultural sales consultant at **Marion Ag Services, Inc.**, in St. Paul, Oregon. “I see myself being in this industry for a long time and I want to have friends in the place that I call home.”



Henry Golb

Golb has been to three events looking to meet people and make friends. “It’s hard when you go to a nursery where a friend works and they’re busy and I’m busy and we don’t have time to connect. But the NexGen events give you the opportunity to do that,” he said.

Skye Cuevas-Arevalo, 24, a production coordinator at **Kraemer’s Nursery** in Mt. Angel, Oregon, was also drawn to NexGen for the same reason. “I realized early on that this industry is predominantly older, so pretty soon those folks will be retiring and we’re the next ones in line. I thought it would be great to start



Skye Cuevas-Arevalo

meeting people and building connections early on. I didn’t know people in the industry in Oregon because I moved here from California.”

Cooper Tucker, 23, who works at **John Holmlund Nursery**, in Boring, Oregon, is the grandson of founder John Holmlund, and is working to learn the family business.



Cooper Tucker

“You’re hanging out with people in similar situations to what you’re in, hear their stories, make friends over time. You get to build relationships friendships, learn what’s going on in other people’s worlds, learn about their jobs.”

Advancing career, gaining knowledge

To many who join NexGen, there’s also an opportunity to build their career and knowledge at the same time.

Erika Willis, 35, is a



NexGen hosted a picnic at Silver Falls State Park in August of 2023, right before Farwest. PHOTO BY ELIZABETH BRENTANO

nursery sales agronomist —for **Wilbur-Ellis** in Woodburn, Oregon. Her parents own **KG Farms, Inc.** in Woodburn, Oregon.

“The role I’m in now is customer support and sales so I go around helping people with their crops and get to know them. I feel like I’ve been fortunate to get to know a lot of people, but there’s so many people and so many nurseries that I don’t know.



Erika Willis

Willis noted that Next Gen is really for anyone newer to the industry.

“So many people hear ‘NexGen’ and think that it’s not for them,” she said. “But my question is this: Do you have a full generation ahead of you in the workplace? Do you have less than 10 years in your current role? If your answer to either of these questions is yes, NexGen has a place for you.”

Willis has found that the diversity of nursery businesses, in terms of how they operate, makes networking more important as well as more useful.

“I think nurseries are interesting because there’s no single blueprint,” she said. “Every nursery has found organic ways to solve their own problems. We’re all different and we have different experiences, so everyone has their own way to solve their own problems. They all have the same goal: sell healthy plant material. I’m in an interesting position of hearing people’s problems and trying to figure out

ways to help them find a solution to their problem. There’s no cookie cutter solution. It makes it a challenge, but I enjoy the variety of it.”

Of course, meeting people can help lead to sales.

“If people need an agronomist and they have a relationship with me, it could be a natural path for them to want to work with me,” Willis said. “That’s the benefit for me.”

Nicholas Michels, 33, is an IPM coordinator at **North American Plants** in McMinnville, Oregon, was drawn to NexGen for personal growth and to help others. “I hope to learn a lot from the group and take my experience and help others do better at their job,” he said.



Nicholas Michels

“I work with pesticides, but I also enjoy keeping the environment safe,” Michels said. “So I’m happy if there’s any way I can help someone get rid of their pest or plant health problem in a way that’s also good to the environment. I also want to learn as much as I can because I want to help produce the healthiest plants possible. I want to continue my education as well as help other people.”

What’s next?

Brentano and Lewis see an opportunity to connect NexGen with ag students at OSU. “It would be great outreach for college students who are interested in hor-

ticulture,” Lewis said.

“I was inspired at the OAN Convention during the Fireside Chat at lunch on Saturday,” Brentano said. “Jonathan Jasinski from **Microplant Nursery** talked a lot about college students, saying there is a disconnect between college students’ and employers’ expectations about entry-level jobs and career paths. We want to connect with college students and let them know what it’s like to work in the industry so they’re ready when they graduate.”

“My expectation was that after a couple of events, people would be asking for the group to organize tours or speakers, something more professional. But the feedback has consistently remained that people are so grateful to have this opportunity simply to get out and meet people, make friends, and build a personal network within the industry,” Brentano said. “It seems as though the professional stuff may come later naturally, but even if we organize a tour at some point in the future, we will still allot time for networking so that people can catch up with one another, both on business and personal happenings.”

The group is also working to organize more formally. “We’ve talked about organizational structure, officers and elections,” Brentano said.

Recognition and stature

The OAN Board of Directors voted in December to authorize Nursery Professionals and Leadership Groups, with NexGen being the first group approved. OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone is a big supporter.

“We’re very excited that the



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NexGen

If you would like to connect with, support, or join NexGen, you can reach them at NexGenHort@gmail.com and follow them on Instagram [@NexGenHort](https://www.instagram.com/NexGenHort) or go to OAN.org/Page/LeadershipGroups.



NexGen's first event was at Bullwinkles, in Wilsonville. PHOTO BY ELIZABETH BRENTANO

OAN Board of Directors has approved the creation of Nursey Professionals and Leadership Groups and recognized NexGen as one of these groups," he said. "This has been a goal of our President Amanda Staehely to make sure that the organization is continually evolving and changing to meet the needs of its members and those who work in the industry. We look forward to working with Elizabeth Brentano and Trystan Lewis and NexGen."

The plan calls for creation of a Human Resources Professionals group, Hispanic Leadership Group and Grower Segments groups later this year.

Staehely has been a main driver behind the new leadership groups. "It's been one of my priorities as OAN President to make sure that the organization is responsive to the changing needs of the industry and those who work in it, and to also find ways to increase the engagement of current members and engage potential members," she said. "Recognizing nursery professional and leadership groups like NexGen is an important step in that direction. Engaging NexGen will help us expand the pipeline of industry professionals and help develop the future leaders in our industry."

With recognition from the OAN, NexGen and its leaders, including Brentano, are excited about what's next.

"I feel very excited to be officially joining the OAN in this capacity," she said. "It means a lot to us that we have the support of the OAN staff and board and the industry as a whole. I am very thankful for the financial stability that it will provide us with, which encourages me to know that this group will be around for years to come."

Lewis sees working with the OAN as a positive development as well.

"The OAN will increase the awareness of NexGen through advertising, which will help us grow," he said. "The freedom OAN gives NexGen allows us to stay committed to our desire for freedom. The funding from OAN will help with hosting better quality events, which will attract more people."

According to Brentano, the group knew it could have stayed fully independent of OAN and talked it over.

"We consulted very closely with the active members of our group before making the decision to move forward with joining the OAN," she said. "We decided, as a group, that our number one priority is to make sure we create a space that is inviting to everyone in the industry, regardless of whether they had heard of the OAN before. Our main concern was that we didn't want to exclude anyone from membership in NexGen if they were not an OAN member. The OAN has reassured us that we are our own group, and we can keep our identity and our mission intact, so with that promise the group was unanimously in favor of becoming the first Nursery Professionals Group. I think everyone is curious but overall excited. Both the OAN and us realize that we will be mutually beneficial to one another."

The group continues to build excitement and membership, and plan events. "We have an e-mail list of 60 subscribers and we've had four events so far," Brentano said. "I would say the feedback is very positive and word is still spreading."

"We just want to keep this momentum up! Keep holding fun and interesting

events and keep growing our audience. We sent out a google poll to get official data from the group on where they see us going, and it looks like we will still focus primarily on activity-oriented events, but we are looking forward to sprinkling an industry tour or two in there as well."

Lewis said the future is bright. "The ultimate goal is to continue to grow our group by making more people aware of NexGen," he said. "We feel that the quality of our events will spread the word to new people. Sharing relationships will help our members identify future opportunities. Supporting our member's needs is as important as our desire to grow."

Brentano and Lewis acknowledge that without key support, the group would not have gotten off the ground.

"This group would not have started without the encouragement of the Robinsons and John Lewis," Brentano said. "But it also would not have made it past our first event without the continued support of other individuals and companies, especially thanks to Kraemer's Nursery, **Means Nursery**, KG Farms, and Wilbur-Ellis.

"And we owe another thanks to the OAN staff and board members who have given advice, helped share our events with a wide audience, and who will hopefully help us chart our path forward to keep the group going strong for years to come," Brentano said. ☺

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