

A tale of two presidents

One of the tremendous blessings of being your executive director is to witness the emergence, growth and impact of our volunteer leaders.

OAN's leadership structure is different from those like the Oregon Farm Bureau; our president serves a single year. Prior to taking on their role, each president works their way up the seven-member executive committee serving in various roles.

The OAN will celebrate the industry, our accomplishments, meet our challenges head on at the upcoming Annual Convention, which will be held Friday–Saturday, November 6–7 at the Sunriver Resort in beautiful Central Oregon. There, we will swear in our new president, Darcy Ruef from **Al's Garden & Home**.

Darcy will be following two other family members to serve as president: her father, Jack Bigej (1993), and her brother, Mark (2017). Darcy is a terrific leader, and I am excited to see what the year brings for her.

But this column is not about Darcy and what is ahead. Rather, it is about two men who you would never think would become very close friends. This is a tale of two presidents — Ben Verhoeven (**Peoria Gardens**) and Patrick Newton (**Powell's Nursery**) — two family men who are special to me.

Paths to leadership

When leaders emerge, it is something to behold, and both Ben and Patrick have lent their personalities and skills to OAN. Within our organization, the chapters and committees serve as proving grounds for board leadership and service.

Ben and Patrick both distinguished themselves in very different ways.

Ben helped reorganize and galvanize the Retail and Greenhouse Chapters by combining their forces to lend value to those communities. His talents have been tapped numerous times, ranging from chapter revitalization to building our professional groups.

Change is often frowned upon, but Ben was resolute and inclusive, dissecting an issue and finding a solution. This is a character trait that he would continue at OAN.

Patrick took the committee route and matched his passion for the Farwest Show and the industry with his growing leadership.

We have heard chatter from members about how the show is not the same. Instead of assessing blame or throwing out excuses, Patrick went to work to take the show organizationally down to the studs and look for ways to make Farwest the best it can be. It is a great show and has value. It is also not something we deem immutable. Everything is being put on the table to rejuvenate it.

Taking on such a task can be thankless. That does not dissuade Patrick from pushing boundaries and attempting to unlock opportunities.

Differing political perspectives

To anyone who knows both men, to say that Ben and Patrick share political views would be downright laughable.

The tallest president in history and owner of Peoria Gardens in Albany, Ben is unapologetically (my definition) a progressive. He's a welcome counterweight to prevailing policy sentiments at the Government Relations Committee and board level — demonstrating how the association is solution focused and not solely partisan.

An Oregon City native and Forest Grove resident, Patrick came to the industry via marriage and has a strong conservative outlook. Here again, Patrick embraces the notion that it is better for the association to wield influence at the political level than be obstinate and be constantly angry over policy decisions by the state.

Progressive or conservative, the true middle ground that these two leaders exemplify is that they are committed to the success of the industry.

A trip to the Centennial State

Going on the road to represent Oregon is a privilege. Each year, the



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western nursery associations of North America gather their executive directors and a select number of board members to talk issues, seek solutions for associations' improvement, and create relationships that transcend state or Canadian provincial borders.

Two years ago, Colorado was the destination, and both Ben and Patrick were on the trip. Sometimes you can't pick and choose when magic happens, but I can tell you that arriving five hours early on a Sunday and migrating to the nearest bar to watch NFL games did the trick.

It does not even matter what the name of the restaurant was. What does matter is seeing two leaders really get to know each other. Discussion of pet peeves, family, and making fun of their grumpy executive director yielded five hours of laughter and insight on who they are. This led to a three-day trip that built on itself from that moment and resonates today.

A friendship forged by OAN

Stop number two at the Farwest Show Pub Crawl, I witnessed the manifestation of a friendship that will be long-standing. Watching the interaction between Ben and Patrick, genuine affection and humor made this executive director well up with emotion.

This industry is special. The friendships created within our community are part of our DNA. The tale of these two presidents demonstrates friendships can go beyond the call of service of an association — it reveals the tremendous qualities of two exceptional men. ☺