

UNDERESTIMATING MY VALUE

and a little adage about a cornfield.

One day I was talking with Lou Harvin, the President of Rose's, about their five and dime stores, their slowest growing division due to the growth of their large discount centers. I suggested they focus more on growing their discount stores.

I suggested he sell the small stores off to Mr. Cal Turner, the owner of *Dollar General*. "Lou," I said, "Why don't you try to sell Mr. Turner your five and dimes to Dollar General."

Lou thought that was a great idea, so I called Wayne and asked him to make an appointment with his father-in-law. He did and Lou flew us to the airport in Bowling Green. When we landed, Lou saw an article about a grand opening of a *WalMart* in Bowling Green.

"I've never been to a Walmart Opening and I'd like to go," Lou said.

We rented a car, drove into Bowling Green. When we walked into Walmart, there was Sam Walton himself, loading the shelves. I went over to Lou, pointed and told him "*that's* Sam Walton."

I knew Sam Walton personally, from when I sold Walmart Christmas trees. We had to set up our Christmas trees in the Fairgrounds in Arkansas, and we would make presentations to the buyers as they visited us. The buyers would pick the trees

they liked. At the end of the day, Sam himself would come down to the stalls choosing the ones he liked. He was only going to carry a line of seven trees and we were honored to be part of his program.

We walked over to Sam and I said, “Hello Mr. Sam, how are you?”

“Bill!” he smiled warmly. “How are you? Did you come to help?”

I said no and introduced him to Lou Harvin. Sam said, “I know your father.” They chatted a little and when they were through it was time us to go to Scottsville to meet Mr. Turner.

Mr. Turner and Lou had a great conversation, but after learning about the great success of Dollar General, Lou decided to keep his smaller stores.

On our ride back, Lou and I were having a casual conversation and we were talking about what we do. “Lou,” I said, “You know, I don’t have a college degree like you.”

“You don’t?” He seemed surprised.

“I went to collage for three years and quit with one semester’s worth of credits!” I said. “I just love to create things. But if I lose my business, I don’t have a shingle I can put up, like a lawyer, a teacher, or an accountant. That’s *always* been my fear and insecurity.”

If I failed, what would I do? There was no alternative but to reinvent myself again and again. There was no safety net or alternative career open to me.

Lou abruptly pulled the car off the side of the road. “You’re right. I have a Harvard degree. I’m very well educated, and I run this large family discount chain. But let me prove something to you,” he said. He pointed to a cornfield on the side of the road. “Look out there and tell me what *you* see?”

I looked at the cornfield and said, “I see apartment buildings, a shopping center, a large Rose’s Discount Center as the anchor to the shopping center, a gas station, and a fast-food place,” I said.

“You know what I see?” he said. “I see a corn field. That’s the difference, Bill. You have an imagination, you have vision, you see what *can* be, I only see what I see. That’s why you’ll be successful.” He patted me on the back. “You underestimate what you do and who you are,” he went on. “You just introduced me to two of the biggest retailers in our industry. *You* introduced *me* to *them*! Let’s go see Sam Walton...” he said, “like it’s no big deal! Let’s go visit with Mr. Turner, *No Big Deal!* No education could ever teach anyone how to do that!”

That is one moment with Lou that really helped me a lot. Not having a degree was my Achilles Heel. I was insecure and embarrassed by it. What if I failed? I had a family to support. They were the reason for me to always move forward, always look for new opportunities and possibilities to make something happen.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Not everybody is made for college.
- Lou should have sold the five and dime stores.
- Never underestimate what you can bring the table. This was the very first time that leaders in the retail industry treated me as an equal and asked for my advice. Can you imagine! Sam Walton!