

Transcript: Smile Farms; Jim McCann.

AccessibilityPlus 2022.

John Griffin

Hi. I'm John Griffin. I'm the publisher of Accessibility.com. For this session today, we're going to go dig back into the vault for an interview that I held with Jim McCann, who's founder of 1-800-FLOWERS and an entrepreneur and very, very successful business. He also is a humanitarian, a philanthropist. In that interview, he talked about this organization that he has started called Smile Farms.

My friend Jim McCann will take you to Smile Farms. Legendary story of 1-800-FLOWERS as it became a nationally recognized brand. Then along comes another guy that you knew. Walter approached you after you had reached a mile, large, rather large milestone in your career. You looked at a situation that was very near and dear to your heart and said, "we've got to change this". Smile Farms.

Jim McCann

Sure. Let me let me tell you how that came about. It's a combination of different things, John. So my brother Chris and I have been working together for forever. My brother is ten years my junior. I'm the oldest of five kids. Chris is the youngest by ten years younger than me. And we have two sisters and in the middle, we have another brother, Kevin.

And Kevin was born developmentally disabled. Back to the company, we're privileged here at Flowers and our related companies, like Harry & David, Cheryl's Cookies, and Personalization Mall, Simply Chocolate. We have all these gift brands. And we have all these wonderful people work for us, many of whom we find to be very generous with their time and their effort, their money and helping charitable efforts in their communities. And what we struck by how generous these people are who were privileged to work with. But what we didn't have, John, was one charity that we could really put our would be high in the sense of not only our time and our money, but our creativity and all of our energies. And we were always saying, you know what, one charity could we really make a difference with?

And we saw the benefits of other companies having done that. I always marveled at McDonald's with what they did with Ronald McDonald House and how they had such an impact on such an important group of people in need on a national and global basis. And how that really impacted how people felt about their brand and how people who work there felt about the company they worked for because of the work they did.

So we're always in search of that. Low and behold, you mentioned Walter. Walter Stockton is a friend and the founder of an organization called IGHL. Independent

Group Home Living. And we're very, very fortunate in that Kevin was in a was in a home in upstate New York a few hours away. And because of that, he wasn't as close and as such a strong part of our families as we'd like him to be if he was closest to all of our families geographically. So I had been introduced to Walter back in the early nineties and by a mutual friend who asked if we can do some promotional things in support of IGHL. And IGHL, Walter started on his own back over 40 years ago because he saw that people were being put out of an institution on Staten Island called Willowbrook, and they were being forced back into their communities.

But there weren't enough programs to help them. So Walter was teaching at Suffolk County Community College, and they went to a local business group and said, "hey, you guys I'm a gonna put up my time and sweat equity here. But there are so many people from our community who now have no place to go who need care.

Why don't we pass the hat and see if we can build a group home to at least take care of ten of those people?" And so he did that over 40 years ago. Fast forward, IGHL takes care of about 8000 people a day on Long Island, with day care programs, with rehab programs, with residential programs, with group homes, with senior living programs, because now this population of people actually lives to the same ripe old age as is the rest of us now.

And so sometimes nursing home care involved. Some of them are medically frail, some of them children with very tough medical conditions. And so Walter just is a creature of growth. And if he knows people are in need, he is going to try and solve that need. So we were introduced. We did some work together. And finally I asked him, I said, you know, my brother Kevin's doing well in this wonderful place in Sullivan County, but we would love to have him closer. Would you mind asking your team to evaluate him to see if he might be appropriate for one of your group homes? Indeed he did. And in 1994, Kevin moved into one of IGHL's group homes and has flourished ever since. But six years ago Walter calls me and says, "Jim, people like your brother Kevin and so many other people in my agency are like him, that they could and should be working in their community.

But I can't find jobs for them. But I have an idea." And his idea was that Chris and I would get out the checkbook. We buy a piece of property. We built some greenhouses on it, and we'd create work opportunities for them to grow flowers and plants because he knew that they grew them, even though they're in a not for profit world, that we could get, that our florists would be interested in buying those materials.

And indeed, that worked out perfectly.

Video Transition to Smile Farms Commercial

[On-screen: Smile Farms. Creating Jobs, Growing Goodness & Helping Neighbors.]

Jim McCann, Founder, Chairman & President, Smile Farms Board of Directors

Here in the United States, 80% of developmentally disabled adults are unemployed. 80%. That's unacceptable. And we're going to change that.

Chris McCann, Smile Farms Founding Family

It's our responsibility in the communities in which we live to help those who live in our communities, to help those in need.

Unidentified speaker

There are work programs throughout the country, from the elementary school age and to middle school, high school. They even have college programs. The problem that we have nationally is that you hit a dead-end point. So what we're doing here at Smile Farms is we're creating that structure.

This is actually a functioning business model. We're actually putting people to work, growing the plants, interacting with the customers.

Cheryl Gromacki, Farmer, Smile Farms at IGHL

I love to grow things for my family and my friends.

Nick Shepis, Farmer, Smile Farms at IGHL

We can make sure the plant state as thoroughly soaked, make sure they're okay for the hot lights, cover them up and they grow.

[Video transitions away from the commercial back to the AccessibilityPlus presentation.]

Jim McCann

So six years ago, we created Smile Farms where we grew flowers and plants. But over time, we have the same drive that Walter does in terms of there's so many more people and there's so many more families in need. How do we do more? So we start fundraising. And what do we find along the way, John? Boy, do our people here at Flowers take to it. These people are millennials and Generation Z, who everyone told us we're going to be lazy and self-centered and only interested in their own worlds.

It's nonsense. They are hardworking. They're caring. They give their time, their energy. When we're trying to do one of our fundraising events, we have a half a dozen big events throughout the year to try and raise money to fund our growth efforts at Smile Farms, these people volunteer in droves. And not only that, we get to know them better.

You know, when I get to interact with someone who is three weeks new to the company, it might have taken me months or years to get to know them under

normal circumstances. But when we're working a fundraiser together and stuffing bags and a goodie bag at a golf outing, you get to know people really well. And you get to know the friend that they've brought along to help them who doesn't work for us, who then says, "by the way, I really like what you guys stand for as a company, and I really like what you do in terms of your charitable activities.

I'd like to talk to the people in your talent, the HR Department, because I might want to work for you too." So to have all those cultural benefits and contagion benefits that we hoped would, but we never imagined how important it would be. And then of course, for the people like my brother Kevin, who work at Smile Farms, you know and I know, we've been very, very lucky in our lives.

And, you know and I know that work is a lot more than about a paycheck. It's about who you are. It's your *raison d'être*. Why you get up in the morning. It's your sense of community. It's your sense of achievement. It's your sense of giving back to your community, making a positive contribution to your community. Oh, and yes, getting paid.

And maybe most importantly, it's social. And certainly we haven't, haven't we learned that social impact during this COVID-era. Smile Farms was off to a screaming success right away. And we just kept trying to take that to more and more people. And we've seen the benefit it has on individuals in terms of their growth, their experience set, their sense of worth, the impact it has on their whole family.

Not to mention the group home they might live in or the program they're a part of. The rippling benefits are enormous. And so now we we keep growing. We now have ten campuses, John, all around the New York Metropolitan area. We're likely to expand beyond that because the need is universal. The number of people and... But John, I'll ask you this question Does a week go by that you don't meet somebody from another family that has someone in special needs in their family, too?

I can't find the family that doesn't have someone with special needs. And it seems like a bit of an epidemic in terms of the impact of this Autism wave that we're experiencing. That there are going to be more and more people who have special needs who can and should be making a positive contribution to their family, to their community, to the agency they work with to the companies that they work with.

And we just think it's a darn shame, especially with the challenge on skilled labor and labor of any kind of the country's facing now, that this population of disabled people, who are able and qualified to work or even if we just focus on the people who are qualified. Disabled, yes. But qualified and able to work. 80% of them. 80% are unemployed.

And it just seems like a crazy mismatch. And we're trying to do our little part to narrow that gap.

John Griffin

Did you run into any barriers that in any way held you back by government, local regulations, anything like that? Or did you find cooperation when you decided you were going to do this and, you know, did anybody come out and get in your way?

Jim McCann

I wouldn't say so, John. One of the things that I'm amazed at and gives buoys my spirits is how much people want to go out of their way to help.

John Griffin

Yeah.

Jim McCann

The only thing that I can think of along those lines, it's the unintended consequences of let's call it people's good intentions. I don't know the people, but I'm sure the intentions based were basically good, but the legislation that you have to pay everybody the appropriate minimum wage in your state, which served as a real blow to people running sheltered workshops. Because some people just can't command the prevailing minimum wage in terms of their output. So now many of those people have been put out of work. Or they're working far fewer hours and they could or should because of this minimum wage requirement. So I assume it was well-intentioned, but it had a negative unintended consequence on the sheltered workshop community and people with these special needs getting to be part of the workforce. But but in terms of municipalities, we're headquartered here in Nassau County, in Long Island.

The Nassau County Executive, Laura Curran, the Suffolk County Executive, Steve Malone. Their teams, their people, their offices, they as individuals, have been extremely supportive and go out of their way to say we need to put more people to work. How can we help you ramp up quicker? At Smile Farms about three 340 now.

John Griffin

340 persons getting a paycheck.

Jim McCann

Yep.

John Griffin

Yeah. Pity is not a part of their lives anymore.

Jim McCann

No, it isn't. Let me let me tell you a story that makes that point. There is a, IGHL has an annual dinner dance as one of their staples in their fundraising calendar.

And it's always held the Thursday in May after Mother's Day. And we're keenly aware of that because it was the Thursday before we couldn't be there because every Thursday after we've come up for air, we're ready to party.

John Griffin

Before you go to vacation.

Jim McCann

Well, vacation is a little bit off at that point. But anyway, we were at that IGHL dinner and a just a couple of years ago and a couple comes up to me to say, "I just want to thank you and your family for what you do with Smile Farms." And they proceed to tell me their story. And their story was that they have a daughter and we'll make up a name.

We'll call her Emily. And Emily had and you know the story, not hers in particular, but this circumstance. They have three children, all grown. Emily, the youngest. She has an older brother, an older sister, they're married, have their own families and live in communities nearby. Emily ages out of school programs and there is nothing for her to do.

So she sits around all day watching TV in the house. She has no friends, no social interactivity. She becomes more and more miserable. She gains weight. She's hard to be around. Mother and father are very much struggling, but they can't leave her alone. How do they leave the house? It's getting worse. The father confesses to me that sometimes he finds himself working late at the office, even if he doesn't have to.

Because dinner, it becomes so miserable at home. Is her brother and sister had become less frequent in her life because she was a troubled person to be around. And lo and behold, the wife had met Walter Stockton at an event. And she told Walter her story and that of Emily's. And Walter said, "why don't you send her down and we'll see, evaluate her and see if she wouldn't be appropriate to find a job at Smile Farms?" Fast forward. She does. She starts working there and this couple is telling me that Thursday night that their lives have changed. That Emily, Emily has lost weight, her health has improved. She's still complaining, but now it's about how hard she has to work.

And brother and sister have re-engaged in their lives. It's turned not only Emily's life around, but a whole immediate family. A brother, her sister, her parents. They said, look, she's still difficult. But now that big question that we all have when we're concerned or responsible person or parent or person or sibling of someone with a disability, you actually solve this question every night you put your head on the pillow. What happens after I'm gone? And for my family, we've been so fortunate that IGHL, where my brother lives has answered a big part of that for us. And now that he's gainfully employed, we had he and I had dinner with my wife and he and I had dinner together last night, and he's chatterbox about what's going on at Smile

Farms, what they're planting now, what's going next and how he spent the whole week disinfecting and sanitizing all the pallets they used for the last crop.

And he only got it all finished on Friday and he got a special recognition for getting a whole week's worth of work done in no time at all. So he's got to, he's part of the conversation. He's just not sitting there. He's bragging about what's going on at work. He has something you talk about and it's social. And if you're socially denied, your, all of your issues are magnified and multiplied.

John Griffin

And he's become purposeful. And you know what you just what you just described is a person who, as you said before, you get up every morning and you have a purpose to what it is that that you're seeing in front of you for the next 15 or 16 hours. You know and and that's what you do.

That's what I do. And that's what people like us do. For years that was segregated far, far away from from where they where they were. You can't do this. Well, it turns out they can do it.

Jim McCann

Do they need extra help? Yes, they need different structures. Yes. But it's so much better for the community or the the grand community and the small community when people aren't just sitting around. First of all, there's a whole lot of professionals who have to work with them. There's a whole lot of people involved in the transportation of these people.

There are medical personnel involved. We're buying a lot of product for our greenhouses, but growing a lot of products. Friends of mine that are restaurant tours and chefs have stepped up and say, "hey, could you grow for us blank? Microgreens. These kinds of herbs. If you do, I'll buy everything you can grow and use them in my restaurant."

And and then the other the the circle of life kind of thing that happens, John, that is most encouraging is when you see we have a facility where just just about everybody is in a wheelchair, all these kids, and they're profoundly disabled. Yet just a month ago when we finished growing our in our outdoor raised hydroponic beds, our cucumbers our tomatoes, and our peppers... We were growing so much we couldn't use them in all our group homes and all our other non-for-profit facilities.

We had extra. And to see them the pride on their face when they closed the door, the truck and the truck takes off to go to the soup kitchen nearby where we give them our produce. Our excess produce several times a year, the pride on their face that they know that they were helping somebody else with a different need than theirs.

There's no describing the pride that they demonstrate when, when, when they're in that circumstance. So I love the idea of people with one need helping people with a different need. But I think people are waking up. You know, when you see an inspired leadership like County Executive Malone and County Executive Laura Curran saying, "hey, how do we pull together government resources, community resources, corporate resources in our community to make one plus one plus one equal 12?"

Then you say, "wow, good things can happen". This would be relevant to what you're doing at Accessibility. One of our campuses is in Brooklyn, and Crown Heights area, I think it is. And they have a very small plot of land outside their building where we said, you know, we were going to do a Smile Farms campus and but they didn't have a lot of square footage.

And so the Director there said, "I know what we'll do. We're going to grow peppers here. And from those peppers, we're going to make hot sauce because people who like hot sauce really like hot sauce." And so we borrowed that idea from him to bring it to all of our campuses. So we grow all different things on all our different campuses.

But the only thing we the only one crop we grow on every one of our campuses is peppers. Because over the last three years now we've been making Heat From the Heart Hot Sauce. And we sell those bottles of hot sauce and people love it. They tell us it's really good. We had the folks in the Brooklyn Grange help us to develop our recipes on sauces and make our hot sauce this time of year each year and it's really catching on.

And so we're we're now looking for more space where we can claim more peppers for next year because we sell every bottle of hot sauce we make every year.

John Griffin

Well, you know, you say that and then and then I think to when Paul Newman started out with the Hole in the Wall Gang and, you know, he started developing products and so on. and so forth that became top shelf products and, you know, in high demand.

Jim McCann

And indeed they are. And they fund an unbelievable array of programs, including Hole in the Wall Gang camps which are all over the world now. Yes, Africa, they're in the Middle East, and its all comes from people saying, "hey, I could buy this this salad dressing or this salad dressing. But if I buy this one, some kids are going to benefit from it because some kid who has a terrible health condition is going to have his first ever camp experience.

And that could change his life. I think I'll take Paul Newman's Own."