



The genesis of David James and Greenleaf Industries

BY SIOUX ROGERS

I thought I had met my true soul mate or at least my twin—give or take a few years and different parents. Well, he looked like I usually look: grubby, well-worn boots, dirty fingernails and all.

I was sitting in his office, chatting on and off the record with David James, founder of Greenleaf Industries. David, a very modest man, asked that I talk more about Greenleaf than about him. I protested, saying, “But David, I interviewed *you*.” He insisted that Greenleaf is what is important and what needs to be written about. Actually, David and Greenleaf are difficult to separate. So to oblige David, this article intertwines the man, the business and the genesis of them both.

Greenleaf Industries states in its brochure that it “is a nonprofit organization serving as the Northwest’s largest horticulture training center providing quality training and employment opportunities for men and women who have developmental disabilities (DD). Greenleaf has become an admired model opening new horizons for the DD population within our

community.”

David said, “My entire life has been about happenings, a journey of coincidences. I was waiting for a bus and I missed it and just happened to meet this guy. He turned me on to the next ‘thing.’ My life has been a good ride.” David has a great sense of humor, focus, direction and kindness.

After receiving a degree in agriculture from Chico State, David moved to Williams, Oregon. In 1977 he took his first job with the agricultural extension office in Grants Pass, helping people work in their own gardens. At the same time, his mission clearly was already on a path as he began a 4-H community project for the DD population. David mentioned that he had no idea he had the easy ability to work with the DD. He did and still does.

In 1980, he received a HUD community block grant that funded the beginnings of Greenleaf. The City of Grants Pass furnished the land back then. It was next to a sewage plant where Greenleaf remained for 14 years. They moved to their current site in 1995. The

primary workers at Greenleaf consist of 21 DD adults. David said that as a social service program they not only try to be productive, but also to maintain very high standards. “We have so many different abilities; we use the strength of everyone to bring out their best. This is like family here: birth, marriage, death.”

Much of the following is from the Greenleaf web site (www.greenleafindustries.org) and reprinted because of David’s pleading to write more about the business.

“In 1982 the Greenleaf staff wanted to reward its DD workforce for a job well done and decided to organize a camping trip to the coast. It was an instant success and the Greenleaf retreat has become a ‘much-looked-forward-to’ annual event, a four-day getaway and reward to our employees for their dedicated service.”

Greenleaf strives to be a self-reliant program. “Over 94% of our total operating budget is generated through plant sales or related services. Our nursery produces over 2.5 million plants

including over 300 varieties of flowers and vegetables.”

Greenleaf is “dedicated to improving the quality of life for those with disabilities...” In that vein, their community gardens contribute to feeding the area’s homeless! How is that for the old saying, “I was sad because I had no shoes until I saw a man without any feet”?

Greenleaf is a model of excellence for more than just producing an excellent product at a fair price. It is a model for allowing a person to achieve, before judgment, their best potential. David James himself—although his great modesty will protest—is a visionary without an ego. David is in tune and in touch, and continues to walk on a path as a leader with an untethered mission.

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Photos above: Greenleafers gather last summer at the completion of the Greenleaf Garden, which was funded in part from a grant from the 4-Way Community foundation and was designed and built by “volunteer extraordinaire” Ron Willing. The raised bed gardens are used by Greenleaf’s 4-H Club to grow flowers and vegetables.

OH, COUNTRY LIFE!

Oh, country life! A million things to do, always a million things. And so many that never get done; like the ironing—that pile of shirts has been sitting on the dryer for months . . .

Those pretty bedding plants we bought last week are still languishing in their little plastic pots, growing more root-bound by the minute. They mutely plead for release; but I cannot look at them as I walk by, past the half-weeded flower garden, on my way to water the hens, and clean up what’s left of the chicken feed that the raccoons knocked over last night, before the squirrels and the wild birds eat it all for breakfast!

The weeds in the veggie garden keep coming back. I spent hours weeding yesterday, but the little weeds come up so much faster than the seeds I planted, and the wild morning glories have major roots lurking somewhere down deep in the dark. No matter how many I pull, they keep sending up new shoots.

My dog Nick has his ball, he’s whining by the garden gate—I call, “Not now, Nick!” and notice another big clump of bindweed, smugly spreading

out its skirts to sun itself in the lettuce patch that was weed-free just days ago. And look—the cat has rearranged the carrot seedlings. Again.

The rosy headed finch just dive-bombed me for walking by the spruce tree. No wonder. I can hear chirping—her babies have hatched. At least something has gotten accomplished around here. Now she starts the big race to bring them enough food fast enough. “Cheep, cheep, cheep!”

The bird feeder needs filling, and I trip in the giant hole the dogs have dug, looking for gophers. Where did we put the gopher traps? Where is my husband when I need him? He was planting those new apple trees, but the neighbor’s bull escaped, and he rushed off to help. . . .

The phone is ringing as I walk in to get a cool drink. It’s my friends, calling from the city. They want to take a break from their hectic life and slow down in the quiet country of the Applegate. Should I tell them to bring kneepads and work gloves along with their pretty sun hats?

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