

Ralph Lagergren

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

From rotors to Rageball 5. This unusual phrase describes the diverse types of new products which one remarkable rural entrepreneur has worked on developing. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Ralph Lagergren is an entrepreneur and new product developer who grew up in Lincoln County, Kansas. One of his friends growing up was his cousin Mark Underwood. They spent lots of their summers together on the Underwood family farm, located two counties north.

Ralph went to K-State and then into a sales and marketing career that took him around the country. He did well in the corporate world but became bored. Ralph was working for a pharmaceutical company in Fort Worth when he recalled a conversation he had previously had with his cousin Mark back in Kansas.

Mark had an idea for a new and improved type of combine in which two rotating rotors would separate the grain from the plant material when a field crop is harvested, thus saving grain and reducing loss. Mark had been tinkering with the idea for several years.

Ralph called him from Texas and said he would be home in a couple of weeks and asked him to do some drawings of his new design. Mark did so and Ralph became convinced that this design would work. Ralph gave two weeks notice at his corporate job. The next thing he knew, he was back in Kansas.

For the next several years, Mark and Ralph devoted their time to developing this concept which became known as the Bi-Rotor combine. Mark worked on design and mechanics. Ralph did sales and marketing and managed the talented team that they put together. They did lab tests in the ag engineering department at K-State, retrofitted an old combine with the new design for field tests, and then built a new machine altogether.

This is the challenging life of an entrepreneur, taking risks and pushing the envelope. "We about went broke about 50 times," Ralph said with a smile. After years of extraordinary hard work and stress, the cousins made a multimillion dollar deal to sell the design to John Deere in 2002, although the new design was never fully commercialized.

Ralph found that his greatest love was in developing new products. Now living in the Wichita area, he has gone on to a career in product development. Ralph's success led him to meet such people as Ross Perot and Helen Walton.

"I only work on projects that I have a passion for," he said. "If I believe in something, then I think no one can outsell me. If I don't, then I'm the world's worst salesman," he said.

Ralph was once visiting with a prominent Wichita businessman and was asked his definition of an entrepreneur. "Someone willing to live in sheer terror every day," Ralph commented. The businessman replied, "My definition is somebody who can stay in business long enough to be lucky."

There is much truth in both those definitions. Entrepreneurs do take risks and often need to persevere through hard times.

A reporter once asked Ralph, “Why do you take on these projects?” “I grew up in a small town,” Ralph replied. “I didn’t know I couldn’t do it.”

After all, Ralph came from Lincoln, Kansas, and Mark Underwood came from the rural community of Burr Oak, population 249 people. Now, that’s rural.

As is typical of an entrepreneur, there have been plenty of ups and downs in the business. Ralph has taken on projects as diverse as a drywall finishing machine, a new board game, an innovative writing pen, and a leather embossing process. One interesting project is a game called Rageball 5, which is like a cross between dodgeball, paintball, and baseball on steroids.

After visiting a hospital in Texas where he saw children whose lives had been transformed by surgery, Ralph decided that the proceeds from Rageball 5 should go to support surgery for those kids. “I’m put on earth to do things like this,” Ralph said.

From rotors to Rageball 5. That phrase describes the diverse interests of Ralph Lagergren, who is making a difference through caring entrepreneurship.

And there’s more. Ralph recently encountered another one of those products for which he is passionate. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.