

More Than Just Ice Cream

Shae Kennedy

“Braum's makes everything better.”

Tuttle Grain and Supply does not sell ice cream or milk, but as part of the Braum family operation, the dairy store's catch phrase fits the small-town feed store.

The Bill Braum and his family, owners of Braum's Ice Cream and Dairy Stores, have owned Tuttle Grain since 1985, said Jeanette Haywood, a friend of the Braum family and former employee. Prior to the Braum family's ownership, the store was owned by Mid-Continent Farmers' Co-Op, Haywood said.

Haywood said Braum made it a high priority to support the community and put his customers first. These characteristics are evident at Tuttle Grain, and the customers have noticed.

“They are nice and helpful, which makes it comfortable and easy to go buy your supplies,” said Jill Briggs, a Tuttle resident and former FFA member. “If you don't know what you're looking for, they help you find it and give you advice about what to buy.”

Raymond Handke, manager of Tuttle Grain, said he believes the quality customer service Tuttle Grain offers is a direct result of the trust and friendship they build with their customers.

“Building a rapport with customers, getting to know them, and becoming friends with them

over time helps you know your customers better and lets them know you better,” Handke said. “It also makes it easier for us to fit their needs.”

Tuttle Grain works with two other feed stores, also owned by the Braum family, located in Minco and Pocasset. They are able to provide their customers with the products needed because of the cooperation.

“One really good thing about them is the fact that they work in cooperation with other stores,” said C.L. McGill, agricultural education instructor at Tuttle High School. “If they are out of a product at Tuttle, one of the other locations might have it. They will work to get it to you.”

The convenience of their location and dedication to fulfilling customer needs has resulted in many of the local FFA and 4-H members being customers of Tuttle Grain. These students participate in activities such as livestock shows, cake sales and student auctions.

McGill said the first thing that comes to mind when he thinks of the best qualities of Tuttle Grain is the support they give the FFA and 4-H members at these events.

“The biggest thing is the support they give us at the cake auction, the student auction and the county show,” McGill said.

The students also appreciate the support Tuttle Grain offers these events.

“They always helped with add-ons at the county bonus auction when I was showing cattle, and

I appreciated that,” Briggs said.

Handke said supporting the local FFA and 4-H members is important to Tuttle Grain.

“We try to support them in their endeavors, such as showing animals and maintaining the health of the animals,” Handke said. “We go to other activities, such as the student auction and cake sale, and try to support them in any way that we can.”

Another way Tuttle Grain supports the community is employing students in Tuttle and the surrounding areas. McGill said he believes the opportunity benefits his students by giving them a better understanding of what they are learning in his agriculture classes.

“The employment opportunities they provide get the students in touch with agriculture a little bit better,” McGill said.

Handke said he believes the work is good for the students, as it challenges them to grow individually and expand their horizons, and said he enjoys having student workers and watching them learn.

“You can see a young man or woman develop a better work ethic,” Handke said. “They get more into it and learn about building relationships with people. They become more outgoing people, and they get out of their shell.”

Haywood said her oldest daughter worked at Tuttle Grain for three years in high school.

“She gained lots of experience working with the public, balancing books, weighing trucks

during the grain season and finding out what it was like to work long hours, some days from 8 a.m. until 11 or 12 p.m.," Haywood said.

Handke said it is important to him that student workers learn to build relationships with the customers and have a strong work ethic. Chase Collins worked for Tuttle Grain while he was in high school and said the job helped him grow as an individual and be better prepared for the future.

"Working at Tuttle Grain helped me learn how to talk to and deal with different kinds of people that came in to do business," Collins said. "Working there also taught me how to manage my time, even when I was working long hours. I also learned how to take inventory and stock products."

Tuttle Grain is often a stopping point for the Easter Bunny when gathering gifts. Tuttle Grain carries rabbits, ducks and chickens around the Easter holiday. The employees enjoy seeing the excitement in children as they play with the animals.

"When I was employed at Braum's, Easter was always an exciting time because we would get the baby chicks and bunnies in for the children to come in and see," Haywood said. "Their eyes would light up and of course they would say 'please can we have one?' Our grandchildren would always go home with one or two."

Some of Tuttle Grain's employees have been employed for many years. The employees stay with Tuttle Grain because they enjoy the work, the environment, their colleagues and, most of all, their customers. Handke said he has been with Tuttle Grain for 23 years, and enjoys the customers more

than the work itself.

“The job is good, but it comes down to the relationships with people,” Handke said. “That’s what makes it worthwhile.”

Handke said the greatest reward is seeing how his advice helps customers and makes them happy. He said he advises them on home and lawn care, animal care and, sometimes, their future.

“I see the results in my efforts when people come in and say how something I recommended worked on their lawn or that their animal did well at the show,” Handke said. “I also have had several kids come in and say ‘I’m glad you encouraged me to go to college!’”

Whether they are building lasting relationships with their customers, giving advice, supporting the youth, shaping student workers or just enjoying their job, the employees of Tuttle Grain and Supply are carrying out a tradition Bill Braum and his family began years ago – making things better.

(Sidebar)

The Heart of a Family at the Heart of an Operation

When the Braum family purchased the Mid-Continent Farmers' Co-Op in early 1985, they changed the name to Braum's Grain and set new goals for the company. The name was later changed to Tuttle Grain and Supply, but the Braum family and their goals remained at the heart of the operation.

The goal was to help the community by bringing new jobs and more revenue to Tuttle. They also wanted to make Tuttle Grain a convenient place for the community to pick up farming supplies, said Jeanette Haywood, a friend of the Braum family and former employee. Haywood said Bill Braum has always had a passion for helping the community in any way he could, and that his business directly reflected his passion.

Haywood said when Braum purchased the store, repairs to the building were needed so badly that Braum made the decision to tear the building down and start from scratch.

“The new facility brought a breath of fresh air to the corner it was built on; it was a very nice building,” Haywood said. “Mr. Braum made the decision to clean things up and build a new business that Tuttle would be proud of, and he did just that.”

Haywood was an employee at the corporate offices in Oklahoma City when the company was purchased. Braum asked Haywood if she would relocate to Tuttle and help run Tuttle Grain, while

Braum kept close watch over the operation.

“Mr. Braum would stop by the elevator once or twice a week to check on how things were going,” Haywood said.

As time passed and the Braum family enterprise grew, Braum turned the operation over to his son, Drew, who also presides over the better-known Braum's Ice Cream and Dairy Stores, but the entire family remains active in running their businesses.

“The Braum family is very involved in all aspects of the businesses they own, and they are an excellent family to work for,” Haywood said.

Haywood said she believes Tuttle Grain is still meeting the Braum family's goal of supporting the Tuttle community.