

## **Entrepreneurial Spotlight**

Pleasant Ridge, Inc was founded by Harry and Juanita Peckham. The story about how their pumpkin and Christmas tree farm came to be the tourist destination it is today is an interesting one. Harry said, "Peckham's Pumpkin Patch and Memory Lane Christmas Tree Farm began as a response to the Farm Crisis in the 1980's that caused many farmers to lose their farms." Harry graduated from K-State University with a degree in Dairy Production. Right after college, he bought part of the family farm and began farming. His solid background in farming made this new venture a lot more seamless than if he didn't know about farming.

When they were only dating, Harry and Juanita looked at alternative crops to grow and settled on pumpkins and Christmas trees. They knew they could get started with pumpkins easily and build a customer base while the Christmas trees were growing. They thought the families coming out to buy pumpkins each year would also come back for their Christmas trees. They were right! Their partnership was fairly simple - if Harry would grow it, Juanita would sell it. So in 1989, they were married and that's when Pleasant Ridge was born. The pumpkin farm has been in operation now for over 35 years.

During pumpkin season, large groups from schools, daycares and retirement communities visit Pleasant Ridge. Schools come from Westphalia and Osawatomie and everywhere in between. There are many amenities at the farm. There is a haywagon ride to the pumpkin patch, hay maze, tube slide, play equipment, games for the kids, and a new pavillion built in 2022 that serves as a great picnic area! The Pavillion can also be rented for family reunions, graduation parties, weddings, club meetings, and any other outdoor event you'd like to hold in a beautiful covered setting in the country.

They ran their pumpkin farm for nearly 10 years before selling any Christmas trees. It takes about that long to grow a large Christmas tree. In 1992, they purchased a simple lighted Nativity scene for the front yard. Soon they added more lights and figures until the whole farmstead was covered in Christmas lights. In 1998, when they opened the Memory Lane Christmas Tree Farm, they moved the Display to the tree farm. It now consists of a half mile drive through the Christmas tree farm with 50 lighted figures or scenes along the road. Many of the figures represent toys from Christmas past. Harry said, "we also have miles of extension cords!" Most of the figures are sponsored by local businesses. Harry says he tries to add new figures to the Display every year.

Harry and Juanita joined the Kansas Christmas Tree Growers Association. Juanita said, "We were inspired by these people. They answered our many questions without any jealousy. They were willing to share any information to help us be successful." Currently, Pleasant Ridge is one of only a handful of tree farms in Kansas. They are the ONLY tree farm in Franklin County. The Christmas tree farm has now been operating for over 25 years.

"I came to see the Lights as a kid, now I'm bringing my kids to see the Lights," is a comment that Harry and Juanita Peckham are hearing more often as they open the Memory Lane Light Display each year. Driving out to see the Light Display has become part of the tradition of celebrating Christmas around eastern Franklin County.

When Christmas tree season begins, they leave the hay maze, tube slide and play equipment available for kids to use while the parents go out to pick out a tree. And in 2020, they added to the tradition with the Memory Tree. The Memory Tree is a 40-foot oak tree covered in lights that is visible from two locations along the Memory Lane drive. The Peckhams built a kiosk with a large bulletin board next to the Memory Tree and invited guests to share memories about a loved one or an event in their lives. At the end of last season, the bulletin board was covered with notecards of memories. Last year some guests even came prepared with Christmas cards that they had already written their memories on. Harry said, "That was the kind of response to the Memory Tree that we were hoping for."

There are a couple interesting programs Pleasant Ridge has become involved in over the years. One is Trees for Troops. This is a program whereby Christmas tree farmers donate trees to distribute to military

families. FedEx picks up and delivers the trees. There are 300 growers who participate in the program across 26 states and ship to 84 different bases across the United States. Harry is very involved in this program and is the Kansas Coordinator of Trees and serves on the board for the Christmas Spirit Foundation.

Another fun program they created is the Trees for Troops Bear. These are 8 inch teddy bears and each bear has his own dog tags and are individually numbered. Juanita said, "We enlist the help of our family members to secure the tags on all the bears." The number one bear is auctioned off each year. This program has become a favorite for collectors. Last year, nearly 800 bears were sold. The money raised helps offsets the cost of the Trees for Troops program. This year's bear is called Buddy. Buddy travels with Harry and Juanita to trade shows and even along with them on their vacations around the world. Buddy has his own Facebook page at Trees for Troops Bears, if you'd like to follow him on his adventures.

When asked about the challenges they have faced along the way, Harry said, "Irrigation is a problem for both pumpkins and Christmas trees when we have a drought." And Juanita said, "Staffing has been an issue for the past few years." We discussed how the staffing issue has been a challenge for nearly every business we've interviewed for this project.

Pleasant Ridge has had MANY successes over the years. Harry and Juanita both agreed that the Memory Tree mentioned above was a huge success for their business. They continue to operate these attractions because they enjoy putting a smile on kids' faces. Harry said, "We may be selling pumpkins and Christmas trees, but our business is making memories!"

Memory Lane Light Display is located south of Wellsville at 2710 Vermont Road. It is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights from 5:30 to 9 each night beginning Thanksgiving weekend. The last night for the Display will be December 24. Admission is \$10 per car or \$2 per person for vans or buses with more than 6 people. A haywagon ride through the Lights will be available Saturday nights from 5:30 to 7:30 for an additional \$1 per person.

