

## MILLENNIAL CORNER:

### **Busting stereotypes of hemp AND Millennials**

*Editor's note: SEAMS is introducing a new feature on the newsletter, Millennial Corner. This blog gives the younger generation – who in the near future will serve in leadership positions and guide the direction of the association – a larger voice and platform NOW and will help them engage more the entire SEAMS' membership while busting stereotypes.*

By Claire Crunk

After 18 months in start-up mode at Southeast Hemp Fiber, I've collected quite the library of colorful stories from hemp-related business dealings.

I once hauled a trailer of hemp stalks across my state of Tennessee smelling like Scooby Doo's Mystery Machine (I was nervous); I was offered actual marijuana before presenting at a conference (I declined); a colleague told me psychedelic mushrooms were going to save the planet (they won't); and I was declined a business checking account at a major national bank because of "reputational harm" (I cried); just to name a few.

Perhaps my favorite tale, though, is from my first SEAMS networking event in 2018. At the dinner table that evening, I took an empty seat offered next to him by Will Duncan, our organization's Executive Director. As we made our first introductions to one another, he chuckled and asked "So, you think I could smoke my shirt?!" We both had a good laugh and carried on discussing the state of domestic hemp fiber and helpful connections throughout the meal.

I love this story not because of the hilarity of the joke or the conversations it spurred but because of the means by which it occurred. As I've come to better know Will and the other members of SEAMS this year, it's clear that offering a seat at the table and welcoming my voice were not just tokens of good manners – they are the very fibers of how he, and all of you, conduct business and build relationships.

As a Millennial, I'm familiar with the concept of sharing the table. In fact, my office desk is in a co-working space south of trendy Nashville. There, we enjoy locally roasted fair-trade coffee in real ceramic mugs, a vintage phone booth for taking conference calls and a basketball hoop. I share table space with a web designer, an architect, a famous IMGUR personality (our older readers may need to Google that), and a Salesforce contractor. We bring our reusable water bottles and stainless steel straws to work ... I can see some of you rolling your eyes now.

These Millennial cultural movements can seem to some as trite or superfluous, but open work spaces and Instagram stories are less about corporate anarchy or pervasive "selfie-itis" and more about a deep desire for connection. According to a 2013 PGI poll, 71 percent of Millennials want to feel like their coworkers are a second family and 88 percent expect their work environment to be social. And that makes sense – work creeps deeper into every waking hour as our digital availability soars, and Millennials understandably wish to ensure that valuable time spent away from friends and family also provides some equitable connection value proposition. With this generation, more than paychecks and health benefits and 401Ks, *connection is our ultimate currency.*

And what exactly is connection, anyway? One of my favorite authors, Brene Brown, describes connection as “the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard and valued.”

And doesn't feeling seen and heard require a seat at the table? It most certainly does.

So, I treasure that night sitting next to Will because he invited my voice to the conversation. It was my first introduction into the textile world's modus operandi and showed me, the Millennial, that I have found my people. After all, the textile industry intimately knows the value of connection. Whether it's a collaborative effort in product development, testing out new ideas in materials, coordination of a factory floor, leveraging relationships for new business, or streamlining supply chains, our industry succeeds only because of the sum of all parts. Our strength and successes are rooted in the quality of the relationships we make. *Connection is currency here, too.*

That connection culture, not the hip vibe of the hemp world, is what melts my butter, so to speak. Certainly, the many mountains of building a textile company in a new industry in the United States can feel overwhelming and, frankly, crazy. However, it offers the special opportunity to work with so many diverse folks: generational and neophyte farmers, government agencies and trade organizations, venture capitalists, global fiber experts, Ph.D. students, the spectrum of spinners and mills from both coasts, legacy cut-and-sew operators, marine biologists and water-treatment facility managers, manufacturers from femcare to batteries, major global retailers, designers and niche brands.

I'm always connected, and I love it.

As I now ascend the tallest mountain of capital fundraising for the processing facility, I know I am seated warmly at a table among friends. Many of you have felt the financial pinch of trade wars, volatile supply chains, capacity expansions and automation equipment additions; the battles of bottom lines, global competition and working capital are hard fought. It is not an easy time, but, despite that stress, you continue to pull a chair out for the next generation, for me. The currency of connection here is abundant, and that's the greatest investment of all. For that, and for so much more, this Millennial thanks you.

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