

Kara Snyder

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the Assistant Dean of Marketing, Communications, and Constituent Relations for the college. Each episode we're sitting down with an alum of the college and today we have a chance to talk to Bill Engel. Bill is an alum of the Department of Agriculture and currently serves as the Executive Vice President and General Manager of Brandt's Specialty Formulations Operating Company. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Bill Engel

Well, thank you for the invitation, Connie.

Kara Snyder

It's gonna be fun. Let's start at the beginning. Why don't you start by telling us, why did you choose ISU?

Bill Engel

Well, first of all, I grew up north of Springfield on a family farm. So the close proximity to home was certainly a key part for me, especially since I was leaving a girlfriend back home, and that girlfriend's now been my wife for almost 49 years. That worked out. Yes, it did. I hope she'd say the same. Also, I did have several family members, mostly cousins, that were either attending ISU at that time or had already attended and graduated. And finally, my best friend and I were roommates in Watterson for two years before we both got married. Well, that just sounds like

Kara Snyder

it was meant to be. And I heard you say that you grew up on a family farm. So was it predetermined

Bill Engel

you were going to be an ag major? Was that always it for you? Pretty much, I would say, I obviously had a great interest in agriculture growing up on that farm. That's basically all I knew. I was active in FFA and things like that in high school. At the same time, I probably didn't feel like I had a great chance to return to the family farm and actually go into a partnership with my father or anything. It was small enough that it would have been very difficult for two families to make a living at that. So I kind of set my sights on, you know, ag as a whole and watched the other, you know, avenues in the ag space. My major was actually called the Comprehensive major, and it focused on agriculture, certainly, but was supplemented with courses from the economics department and the business department. Probably I guess today it would probably be called an agribusiness major.

Kara Snyder

Yeah, I think that makes perfect sense and equipped you to get involved in the ag industry or if you were to help on your farm, it really gave you tools for all of those opportunities.

Bill Engel

No, absolutely. It gave me a very well-rounded insight on agriculture and certainly growing up on just a cash grain farm, it certainly opened up my eyes to all the other avenues of agriculture that were available to me. And I think that's so helpful because, you know, I am actually a farm kid myself and

Kara Snyder

I think when people think about agriculture, that's what they picture. And there's so much opportunity and so many careers available beyond that. So I'm really happy to hear you say that.

Bill Engel

Yes, thanks.

Kara Snyder

And so then tell me, how were you involved on campus outside of the classroom?

Bill Engel

Well, I did intramural sports, for sure. I attended a lot of sporting events, mostly basketball games in Horton Fieldhouse. I was a member of the Alpha Zeta fraternity, which is an honorary ag fraternity. So that wasn't a living fraternity. That was just an honorary group that was available. In my time, their concerts were a big deal in Horton Fieldhouse, and we really had some great concerts and great times there. Groups such as the Doobie Brothers and Grand Funk Railroad, Sly and the Family Stone, they were all live concerts in Horton Fieldhouse. I think it was Grand Funk that had fireworks that actually caught the stage on fire, and that kind of slowed the concert schedule for a while. But then to really, I guess, date myself, every spring we look forward to the weather turning, kind of like it is right now, and looking forward to what was called then the Rites of Spring. I don't know that how many people are still aware of that or know about it today, but it was kind of the first fair weather event and kind of people cut classes and all joined out in the quad and had lots of entertainment in that outdoor setting as well. So that was kind of my general involvement, I guess you'd say, on campus.

Kara Snyder

It sounds like a great time to be at ISU. And for all of our listeners, if you're not familiar with those events, I know I have colleagues at University Marketing that have written about the history of both concerts on campus, which include artists, the ones that Bill mentioned, and also I know Elton John played here at one time. And then there's also a great article on the Rites of Spring, which sounds like quite the event. So feel free to do a deep dive on the News Hub and read more about those. So Bill, I don't know, I'd be torn between those big events, but is there anything that stands out to you? What do you miss most about your time on campus?

Bill Engel

Well, like you said, it was quite a great time. In the spring of 1974, I came in the fall of 73, but the spring of 1974 not only brought the right to spring, that is a spring that streaking first became popular. And I don't think there's much of that done today, but that led to many nights on the quad waiting for the streakers to come flying by. Now, Kara, please understand. I was only a spectator. I was not a participant. But it made for good fun, and the whole university seemed to be involved, or at the very least, they were very curious. So that was an eventful time, for sure. And as I mentioned previously, one of my best friends and I lived in Watterson for two years, and I really liked the, I guess you'd call it the house approach of Waterson, the way they're set up in many suites, and there's 10 or 12 students in each suite, and then several suites make up a house. But I think that approach, you know, got me and my, not my, only my roommate, but other in our house, to be much closer friends. We participated together in intramurals, did a lot of things together. And actually three of those folks that were in our house actually were in our wedding. So it just tightened the bond, I think, that we had by living in almost what truly was a house, only it was in a dorm setting.

Kara Snyder

Yeah, I love that. There's just something about that residence hall life, those connections that you make really are bonds that last far beyond those walls. So I'm so happy to hear that that was the case for you as well. So tell me then, you've got your degree in hand, you've crossed the stage, what was that initial job search like for you? You're not headed directly back to the family farm. So where are you looking?

Bill Engel

Well, just looking and maybe I've been, you know, the old saying, better lucky than good, but I've certainly been blessed in that part of my career. Believe it or not, I've only interviewed for three jobs in my entire career, and I've taken employment in the two that actually offered me an opportunity. They were both close to home, and family is very important to me, so that was certainly helped make those choices. But I graduated in the winter of 76 and began my employment January 1 of 77. And basically I've been working ever since.

Kara Snyder

Well, and I like that because it is so rare these days to see someone stay at the same company for 38 years. And that's definitely something that stood out to me when I was reading your bio. So tell us how you were able to continue to grow as a professional during that time.

Bill Engel

Well, and again, I guess I'd call it very blessed. I've had the opportunity to work with some really great people in the ag space in central Illinois. They were true pioneers in the fertilizer industry and they've certainly left their mark nationwide in that regard. The one thing that they both had in common was they were very entrepreneurial and they were always looking

for new opportunities to kind of branch out. So, as those businesses grew, it just seemed like I always had the opportunity to grow along with them professionally. The current company, Brandt, that I work for, the owner of the company have a very simple philosophy, it seems to me. They basically say they want to hire good people, they want to provide them with the needed assets and tools to grow, and then stay out of the way. And I can honestly say that they live to that philosophy and they've always been able to provide those needed assets and, you know, with their growth, obviously, I've just been able to grow in my profession along with them. And it's been a great ride to see a small company branch out to approximately a half a billion dollar company today.

Kara Snyder

And along the way, throughout your tenure there, how would you describe your leadership style and has it evolved during your time there?

Bill Engel

It certainly has, and I guess a lot of it goes back to the philosophy the company has today. I would say I've adapted to that and remain true to that kind of hands-off management style. I'm very hands-off as long as the wanted results are achieved. And I've certainly found out that as we've grown to, my group is now over 350 employees coast to coast. You better not try to be a micromanager because you're going to wear yourself out and you're not going to be very effective in doing so. I hope my employees appreciate that and we give plenty of room to manage in their own ways. We don't pass down that management. We pass down the guidance, I would say. And we allow a territory manager, as an example, to manage his territory. That's what the title of that job is. So we do our best to train our teams, provide them with the most cutting-edge technologies that we can provide so they can provide them to their customers. And then we back them up with a lot of supporting data, which hopefully shows the consumer, in this case a farmer, how they can really increase their profitability. It's a very, again, hands-off, I guess you would say, is basics of my management style.

Kara Snyder

Which I think is great, because as you've seen, it allows those people underneath you to grow so rapidly over the last 30 plus years.

Bill Engel

I would say so. I think one of the biggest, the things that show that the most are probably the fact that we have people that stay with our company for so long. We have very little turnover. We actually grow so we include and increase the size of the company, but certainly the longevity of people. It's not uncommon at all for us to at our Christmas party each year to give out 10 or 12 20-year watches. And I think that's a testament to the company that people stay.

Kara Snyder

An environment that people want to be a part of is really commendable. So tell me, what is your favorite part of your job?

Bill Engel

I guess I would say it's relationships, right? It's the people, both the employees and the customers. And the fact that we're very diverse in what we do, whether it be corn and soybeans, cotton and peanuts, we also go into fruit and vegetables and even turf and ornamental crops and golf course products. We have something for all of these. We also supply our international team with products, and today that is consumed in over 80 countries worldwide. It provides all of us, especially me, I guess, a great feeling that, you know, we're making a difference in feeding a hungry world. Those aren't just words in this case. We're really seeing it happen and we make sure that even the people in the production plants understand that. And sometimes when they see that next truck coming in for a load, they don't mentally think about the fact that that product is going to probably end up somewhere in Spain or Greece or maybe South Africa and actually make a difference in yields and profitability for growers and in essence again help feed the hungry world.

Kara Snyder

It is amazing the impact that Central Illinois has on feeding the world and how widespread that is so that must really be a point of pride for you every day at your company.

Bill Engel

I remember one of my Ag professors, you just reminded me of this, but he used to call McLean County the buckle of the Corn Belt. And probably no other description was ever better than that. So we certainly are in a productive and important place. It plays a huge role in the agricultural climate of the whole world.

Kara Snyder

Absolutely. And tell me, you know, on the flip side, I always like to ask people, what is the most challenging part of your job?

Bill Engel

I think that's ironic because actually I think the most challenging part is the same part that's the favorite part, and that's the employees and the customers, because it's a challenge to keep the employees, you know, contented and motivated. And we want to strive to be a best-of-class employer. We're family-owned, and we really work hard to keep the family values culture in our business. As we grow and as we spread out, that becomes more difficult all the time, but it's a challenge that's worth taking on, you know, calling our own. The same can be said, I think, for our customers. We strive to provide them products that are best of class as well. And as soon as you become a customer of ours, you're also a part of the family as well. So I think the challenge is, overall, just to make sure that we can continue to drive So I think the challenge is, overall, just to make sure that we can continue to drive those family values throughout the organization, both in our customers and our

employees, and make it a worthwhile type of enterprise for everyone concerned. That makes perfect sense to me.

Kara Snyder

Well, Bill, we're going to finish with a speed round just to get to know you a little bit better, so I want you to go with your first instinct on these questions. Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Bill Engel

Probably more of a night owl, but still in before midnight. Hey, that's late. I get it. That counts as night owl to me. Coffee or tea? Oh, coffee in the morning and iced tea in the afternoon. That's fair.

Kara Snyder

All right, if you have a completely free Saturday, how are you spending it?

Bill Engel

Well, again, we are so blessed that we have our three children and our four grandchildren within 20 minutes of us from either direction. So we're all close together here. Lots of Saturdays are going to include, you know, grandkids sporting events, whether they're indoor basketball during the winter or right now we're just starting to get into prepare for a baseball season. I'm hoping the spring won't be too cold at the beginning of it. And you know, after we get past those sporting events, my wife and I hopefully can sneak in around the golf somewhere as well.

Kara Snyder

Well, there you go. Yes, we are definitely ready for that spring weather and those green golf courses and ball fields and that all sounds great right now. What is the best trip you've ever taken?

Bill Engel

Well, I've been a part of our international development of the company. Actually until about five years ago, it was completely under my purview. And as it grew and as our domestic grew, I just knew that I didn't personally have the bandwidth to carry it forward to the level that my boss, Rick Brandt, wanted to see. So I stepped aside at that point. But as I mentioned, we're still very involved in making products for that group and spreading it out over 80 countries in the world. So, because of this involvement, I've been privileged to go to some really incredible places around the world. I think the one that sticks out most in my mind is our visit to the Patagonia region of southern Chile and Argentina. It's absolutely stunning landscape, very pristine and much untouched, if you will, and something something that I hope to at least get back and see one more time before I leave the planet.

Kara Snyder

That's a great answer. I've never heard that answer to that question. I'll have to put

Bill Engel

that on my bucket list. It's definitely worth it, Cara. It's absolutely beautiful. And if you get that chance, I actually know a tour guide that's a brother to our representative out in Santiago, Chile. So I'd be glad to hook you up.

Kara Snyder

I'll make a note. Thanks. What is the best advice you've ever received?

Bill Engel

Well, I think from a business perspective, my previous boss and mentor had a saying that has really served me well over the years. To paraphrase it, he always said, if we make mistakes, we want to make them in favor of our employees and our customers. To me, that meant, you know, sometimes you have a decision to make and you could feel like you're probably on very solid ground to say, hey, we're right and you're wrong, but is that really the best for the long-term outcome for you, whether it be an employee or a customer? So from that standpoint, sometimes you kind of say, well, I feel like this is a mistake, but I'm going to make this because it's going to be in favor of my employee or my customer, and in the long run, that will come back and serve us well. So that's been very, very good advice to me. From more of a personal perspective, I would say, my dad kind of had a simple thing of try to keep your life in order. And he always talked about faith, family, friends, and farm. And again, as you can see, I've mentioned family several times and friends and farm. So faith, family, friends, and farm are very important and hopefully do keep my life in order.

Kara Snyder

Both great pieces of advice. Thank you for sharing. And Bill, I ask everybody that comes on the podcast, Avanti's Gondola or Pub 2 Cheeseballs?

Bill Engel

That's funny because I laugh when I see that because I'm so old school. You see, I don't know what Pub Cheeseballs are. I'm pretty sure that I'd like them from the sound of it. But again, I would have to still say Avanti's Gondola most likely. Anytime we pass through Bloomington, we still stop by and pick up a couple and bring them home for the next day.

Kara Snyder

Well, fair enough. And next time you're on campus, you'll have to put the cheese balls on your list.

Bill Engel

Will do.

Kara Snyder

All right. And one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Bill Engel

I guess what I would say is that, you know, life's road is very seldom a straight path. There's many twists and turns along the way as you reach out and try to achieve that goal down at the end of the road. But don't be afraid of the change during that time. Embrace the changes. Try to find a way to make the most of them. And if you even find yourself in a second or third year and your major just doesn't seem right to you, don't be afraid to make that change and change the direction and pursue something that you really have a passion for. I think that's very important to be willing to have that flexibility and to the end game is really to have a career that you have a passion for. So when you wake up in it every day, you want to go to work, you don't have to go to work. And the other side of that is try to find a way to give back. You give back to your community, to your school, and of course, your university. And they've all shaped who you've become in various ways. And by giving back a little, it's your opportunity to say thank you and just give them a small piece of yourself. In my personal career, I've been involved over the years in city council, in city park boards, athletic boosters at the school, and even now I'm so fortunate to be involved at ISU with the advisory committee for the Ag Department. And they're all very gratifying, and I've just felt so strongly about having the opportunity to give back a little bit.

Kara Snyder

Well, thanks again for being here, and thanks for that great advice. That was Bill Engel, Executive Vice President and the General Manager of Brandt Specialty Formulations Operating Company. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni. for more stories from our cast alumni.