

Talking Shop with Gerry Jones

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Gerry Jones may be known for his experience in the real estate business, but he also dabbles in the farm business. Jones, 42, has spent much of his life near Fruitland. He graduated from Jackson High School and holds degrees from University of Missouri and the University of Missouri School of Law.

Q: Who has influenced you the most?

A: My parents and my wife have been tremendous influences in my life. I started helping out at my family's newspaper, The Cash-Book Journal, as a young boy, and I always admired my dad, Gerald, for having the courage to step out and start a business and perseverance to make it successful. My mom, Clarice, gave me the encouragement, support and confidence to try anything. My parents never discouraged me from trying anything I was interested in.

My wife Amy has been the best business partner I have ever had. In fact, she has been an integral part of every business success I have had. She is very intelligent and focused. She gets more work done in an hour than most people get done in an entire day. Although Amy has been primarily focused on raising our four children for the past few years, she has just recently become actively involved in the business again. Our skill sets complement each other, and we work very well together as a team.

Additionally, I have been fortunate to have been mentored by some very successful businessmen, including John Lichtenegger of Jackson, an attorney and real estate developer; Don Welge of Chester, Ill., a general manager of Gilster Mary Lee; and Steve Crain of Cape Girardeau, former owner and CEO of Crain Enterprises in Mound City, Ill., and current executive with Trimble Inc., Sunnyvale, Calif.

I have also been influenced by Rush Limbaugh Sr. I worked for the Limbaugh Law Firm during law school and immediately after graduation. Mr. Limbaugh was 98 years old when I started that first summer and he spent a great deal of time with me. He possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of history and law, but more importantly he was a man of integrity. He led by example, not by words.

Q: If you could trade places with anyone for a day, with whom would it be and why?

A: Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms in Virginia. He is the most innovative farmer in the world. He has been largely responsible for changing America's attitudes about food and farming while remaining true to his faith and his family. There are lots of "successful" business people in the world, but many of them attained their "success" at the expense of their families and their integrity.

Q: If you could go back to any time period in history, where would it be and why?

A: I think I would go back to the '30s and '40s. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from this time period. Although our current economic and political system looks really bleak right now, imagine what it was like to try to survive during the Great Depression and World War II. Americans have become soft and have developed a sense of entitlement. Self-discipline and self-reliance seem to be forgotten concepts today.

Q: What is something most people don't know about you?

A: I was a two-time SEMO District Fair Hog Carcass Judging Champion in high school (no joke!). Most people are really surprised that I am involved in farming. I guess most real estate developers play golf for a hobby (I gave that up a couple of years ago) instead of feeding pigs like I do.

Q: How did you get started in your business?

A: In 1995 I was practicing law at the Limbaugh firm in Cape Girardeau and was really enjoying it, but was eager to join the business world. I left the law firm and went to work at The Cash-Book Journal and started building spec houses with Amy's father, Emmett Kennon, who is a retired home builder. I discovered a passion for real estate and business and have been pursuing those passions ever since.



Gerry Jones is the managing partner of River-West Partners L.C. in Cape Girardeau. Jones is also the owner of Jones Heritage Farms LLC in Jackson. Jones is responsible for the real estate development of Walden Park in Cape Girardeau. (Elizabeth Dodd)

Q: What is the greatest thing about your business?

A: I enjoy bringing a vision to reality. It is very exciting to see your ideas come to fruition. For instance, Walden Park, our latest real estate development, is a master-planned community unlike anything ever built in Cape Girardeau. We have taken old concepts such as traditional neighborhood design and architecture and put a modern twist on them. We are creating an entirely new neighborhood and lifestyle for Cape Girardeau.

Walden Park has been very well received and it is very satisfying to have our vision not only appreciated, but validated by people buying our homes.

Q: What kind of background do you have that helped you when starting the business?

A: I think growing up the son of a business owner helped tremendously. I also grew up on a small hobby farm and I quickly learned about hard work and responsibility. My legal education also taught me how to think critically.

Q: Why do you raise all-natural chicken, lamb, beef, vegetables, pork and eggs?

A: Farming is something I loved as a child and I have always had an interest in. I was in 4-H and FFA and my entire family comes from a farming heritage. I wanted my children to have the same experiences I had growing up, so several years ago Amy and I were able to purchase a small amount of acreage and started raising a few cattle and some chickens for our family.

I'm an avid reader so of course I bought every book on farming that I could find. I was shocked to find out how much farming had changed since I was a kid. Modern "farming" (agribusiness) has become industrialized and the result has been plentiful food at cheaper prices, but now our food is tasteless, full of antibiotics and hormones and the animals and our environment are being grossly mistreated. I found out there is dynamic movement in America to change this. Farmers like Joel Salatin and organizations like Slow Food USA, Eat Wild, American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and the Weston E. Price Foundation have all been at the forefront of returning farming to its roots (no pun intended).

What we discovered was that there are a lot of people out there who are concerned about food safety and where their food comes from, so we saw an opportunity for a new business and Jones Heritage Farms was born. We began buying more livestock and hired some help on the farm. Brian Friga became the general manager of the farm and that allowed us to take the farm from a hobby to a full-fledged business.

Q: Why do you think this concept has become so popular in the nation?

A: I think that Michael Polan's book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," has done a lot to raise awareness about food quality and food safety, but the fact that there is a food safety recall on a nearly weekly basis has also forced people to become more aware of these issues. The result has been that the consumer has become more willing to spend their food dollar with local farmers instead of imports from Brazil, New Zealand or China and they are realizing that the food tastes so much better. We're not doing anything groundbreaking, we're just farming like my grandfather did. I think people appreciate the simplicity of that.

Q: Has there ever been a time when you've felt like giving up?

A: Not seriously. Sure, I've been discouraged many times, but I never quit. Perseverance is a must for any businessperson to succeed. It's tough to own your own business and there are new challenges every day.

Q: Anything else you'd like to say?

A: I think balance is important for everyone, but business owners sometimes spend way too much time at work. I work hard and sometimes long hours, but I am committed to my family and my faith in God. God has blessed me and my family.