

An Entrepreneur's Story

Jim Bob Morris, Owner of Morris Packaging

By Joanne Henry

Jim Bob Morris, owner of Morris Packaging, does not take success for granted. Although he's grown Morris Packaging into an award-winning leader in sustainable packaging serving some of the largest Fortune 500 firms, he remembers where he came from. And he's proud of it. The company is certified by the National Minority Supplier Business Council as a minority business enterprise (MBE).

Morris believes it's important to demonstrate that minority-owned businesses can grow to be the best in the industry when given the opportunity.

Morris is a member of the Cherokee Nation with ancestors who go back to the forced resettlement of his ancestors in the Trail of Tears from the fertile lands in the Southeast to the more hardscrabble land of the west. Morris himself grew up poor in the tiny town of Virgil, Kansas, population 60, but he says he never felt deprived. Attitude is everything.

"In our younger years, my brother and I had carte blanche to go wherever we wanted," Morris says. "Everybody in town knew us and we knew everybody. I had my dog, a bike, a fishing pole -- and a baseball glove," he says. "Heck, I didn't know we were poor."

People looked out for each other in Virgil, Kansas.

That stuck with Morris; today, anyone will tell you he is fiercely loyal. He also spurs people to look past their limitations to achieve

This Morris Packaging recyclable bag made from Flex Films PCR-based BOPET film won a Silver Award from Associated Flexible Packaging and a top award from the World Packaging Association in Spring 2021.



Jim Bob Morris

what they can only imagine. His own story is the best example of what can happen when you make opportunity out of hardship.

Jim Bob was nine years old when his father left the family and 12 when his mother died in a car accident. He worked in the nearby oil fields

and started a hay baling operation while he was still in high school. He made enough to buy a Hay Monster and got enough business to add a second crew. An entrepreneur was born.

Morris didn't get formal management and team-building training in college – but that doesn't mean he didn't learn those lessons. While in community college, Morris was spotted as a standout athlete and earned a scholarship to play quarterback for Kansas State where an excellent coach took him under his wing. After that, he was picked up by the NFL to play safety for The Green Bay Packers and then the Houston Oilers. After five knee surgeries and a broken back by the time he was 30, he decided his body needed a new career. Outgoing, high energy and enthusiastic, Morris was a natural in sales where relationships matter.

In his 30's, Morris was recruited by his father-in-law to leave his first sales job to become a packaging broker. He became so successful that his largest supplier could not keep pace with him. At a key fork in his career road, that same supplier suggested to Morris that he walk away from his brokerage business to start a packaging company himself. There was risk involved, but also considerable opportunity if he could make it work.

"I wasn't going to let down my customers," Morris said. "I started a new packaging business almost overnight., buying equipment, finding someone to run it and leasing space. It helped that one of his best packaging customers told him he would be his first order. That customer, Chris Matich at Livingstone Stone, is still a customer, almost 20 years later.

Sustainability as a Core Value

Fast forward to 2020. Morris Packaging customers ship flexible, sustainable packages to protect goods as they travel around the globe. The firm consistently wins accolades for sustainability in its industry. Most recently, its packaging for Flex Films (USA) Inc. was recognized by the World Packaging Organization as a top award winner for a product that reduces its carbon footprint in every segment of manufacturing.

Jim Bob Morris is financially successful beyond

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any of his wildest dreams as a kid in Virgil, Kansas, yet he deliberately runs his businesses from a small, unglamorous office in Bloomington, Illinois. His office rent is low and the furniture is from a discount office supplier.

Morris says he prefers to spend his money on the factory floor where it matters. The company just installed a cutting-edge press from Germany, the newest technology available on the market. Under his leadership, Morris Packaging is an industry leader in sustainable flexible packaging with state-of-the-art equipment. Morris gives credit to his team for recognition that includes the recent Supplier of the Year for Sustainable Packaging from the national Pet Sustainability Coalition.

"We're working with almost all of the major pet food companies," Morris says, "so it's nice to know we're making that kind of an impact by reducing packaging or going the extra mile to reduce the carbon footprint of every product we make. We're doing that now with food and beverage products where we can make an even larger impact due to the scale.

Morris credits his Native American heritage for a strong desire to preserve natural resources for future generations. The eco-ethos impacts every manufacturing process at Morris Packaging. The company also works to reduce packaging wherever possible, recognizing that innovation and creativity can often produce a better product with less materials.

Keeping the team together

Morris operates with a tight knit team who have been with him at Morris Packaging since the early days of the business. He says the secret sauce is that this close team trusts each other, pushes each other, and really enjoy testing the limits to go for a big goal. If this sounds a bit like a sports team, there's a reason for that.

"The importance of keeping a team together is one of the main lessons from my days in football," Morris says. "The most successful teams over time keep their line together," he observes. To that end, Morris hires leaders who can keep the team motivated and inspired; there is no time to be satisfied with the status quo.

Morris Packaging contributes to many nonprofit community organizations. Jim's personal philanthropy is channeled through the Morris Family Foundation, where the Foundation. He just completed a significant gift through his foundation to build a new Morris Family Multicultural Student Center at Kansas State, his alma mater. At the ribbon cutting in November, 2020, he stood with the head of the Native American student group and others to talk about the importance of access to opportunity.

"I was a poor kid who is very lucky to be here," Morris says. He's not one for looking back ("there's a reason the rear-view mirror is a lot smaller than the windshield"). There are too many new opportunities

"No one succeeds alone. That's certainly been true for me." *Jim Bob Morris*

to pursue to spend time reliving the past. Still, Morris acknowledges that he's grateful to have the ability to give back to people and institutions that made his success possible. His goal is to also provide a bridge for those without resources or even the connections to succeed without a hand up. "No one succeeds alone," Morris says. "That's certainly been true for me." ■