

Episode 6: Connecting Communities

[Hinton] Come join us, explore the impact of small business here in rural Arkansas. What challenges would you face? Who can help you meet those challenges? How do you get in touch with others like you? This is Create Bridges, Arkansas, and we invite you to come cross these bridges with us.

[Hinton] We're back with another episode of the Create Bridges podcast series, Arkansas Small Business, Big Rural Impact. I'm UA Cossatot Media director Loren Hinton. And we appreciate you listening.

[Hinton] Today, we're sitting down with Murriel Wiley, program coordinator for the 3Cs Region, and Mallory Bailey of Red River Oil Company in Ashdown. Today's episode is a focus on Community Connections. We'll be discussing the way small businesses support their surrounding areas with volunteer efforts and community partnerships. So we're going to be talking about some of the community connections that you guys have as a small town business. I know that you guys have a few different locations and you do a few different things to give back to your local area. So today we're going to sit down and talk about all of that. Mallory, would you start by giving us some background on what Red River Oil Company is all about?

[Wiley] Sure. So Red River Oil started in June of 2010 when we first opened our doors. We were a tiny little metal building with two gas pumps and some Big Tex out there. And over the course of 10 years, we had grown exponentially. Our Ashtown location, we added a fueling station over there with probably six more pumps. 2014, we purchased what used to be Mayson oil in Foreman, Arkansas. And we moved in and we have some people over there full time. And 2016, we purchased the former ATCO distributing in Texarkana, Texas. So we moved into a much larger market than we had been used to. And right now, we're actually have a new location, Ashtown under construction that will be an unmanned fueling station right there on Highway 32, the bypass. So anybody can go there. Trucks will have the Red River Oil charge keys and they'll be also open to the public.

[Hinton] Wow. So you guys have been busy. Very busy, sometimes hard keep up. I believe that for sure. As far as the things that you guys stay busy with, will you talk to us about your company's role in the retail, tourism and entertainment sector?

[Wiley] Red River Oil would fall into the retail section for Little River County. We do provide fuel and oil lubricant products as well, especially products to the average person or a farmer or any store sort of industry or construction. The farming portion of our community is definitely one of the largest portions that we serve, provide our services to. They need this fuel, especially during hay season or harvest season. I mean, they really are leaning on us to be there, keep their tanks full, provide the products they need for their machinery so that they can get their job done. That also is in turn servicing our community and feeding the people in our community. And that's important.

[Hinton] Yes, very definitely agree with that. So since you guys fall into the retail industry, I know that you guys may have a lot of involvement with your community as far as getting involved, volunteering, giving back. What do you guys do to support your community beyond just filling up your residence?

[Wiley] At Red River Oil we really pride ourselves on being not just a part of the community, but being involved in the community. It's our civic duty to help to help get back to this community that is nurturing all of us and providing things for us. You know, we just want to be able to get back to that. So through that, we like to donate to the schools so their football programs or their PTO for their fundraisers or any

sort of yearbook ad. And we do that for schools in Little River County and Sevier. So we focus on those areas, but we also tend to, we like to do some things for the sports that are not just school involved. So in Foreman, that would be their youth football or Youth Sports Association and Ashtown at the City Park. So as you guys know, in these small towns. First of all, it's hard to raise the money to be able to provide these services or these teams in these games for these children. You know, the parks don't they don't make hardly any money. I mean, they have tournament's come in. They might get some revenue there. And these cities are strapped. The cities are strapped. I mean, Ashtown has one of the highest tax rates in the state of Arkansas. We're in the top 20. It's over 11 percent sales tax. So our city, you know, it's a small town. So it struggles it. It's not like the city can provide to cannot pay for all of these sports programs at the park. So we always volunteer to sponsor those programs at all the local cities that we in the service areas that we're in. Since the farming community is such a big supporter of us, we do try to get back there through the fair and rodeo or premium sale, because a lot of those people have children or grandkids or family members that are involved in those things are gonna be, you know, working with these animals for so long and bring them to that premium sale. So we want to be there to be able to support them, but also show those kids that there are lots of people out there that support them and are proud of what they're doing and encouraging them to continue that work.

[Hinton] And as far as the Chamber of Commerce goes, that's something that you volunteer to do as the vice president, right?

[Wiley] Yes, correct. So I guess I came on, they invited me to our asked me to be on the board two years ago. So this is my second year. Next year, I will be the president of the board. And I absolutely love being involved in that and the events that we do in the community. I think it's really important also, you know, not just for me personally as my civic duty to get involved in my community and give back. But I like to be the face for Red River oil and, you know, get our name out there so that people in the community knows that we're supporting them. The truck and treat, which sadly has to be done a little bit differently this year, is my absolute favorite event that we did for the chamber. So I get to, you know, put my big Red River Oil on my car and decorate my truck with all my skeletons and stuff. And it is so much fun to watch to have all those kids come by and get gobs and gobs and gobs of candy.

[Hinton] Well, that leads me directly into my last question or my next question is the why.

[Wiley] Right.

[Hinton] You guys could so easily just sell your fuel and go about your business open and close everyday. But you do go above and beyond to serve as vice president for your chamber. And you do donate to your premium sales and your county fairs and your schools and your youth sports. Why do you guys do all of that, if you may or may not even see a business return or an impact from it? What makes you guys decide to give back to your community?

[Wiley] Well, for as long as I've been doing this, have doing those things, being involved in the community, building those relationships is absolutely necessary for a small business to survive in a rural county in my opinion. These people have been there. You know, they're your customer, but they're not just your customer. They become your friend. They feel like family. There are people that come in there that I have become friends with over the years that we call them on the phone. We'll get to dinner together. But they also it's the word of mouth. So when they're telling their friends about us, they should know that, you know, how they feel about Red River oil and the services that we provided for

them. You know that it means something. I mean, that means a lot more than just go on Facebook and finding a local business, providing the service that you're looking for. And so maintaining these relationships helps bridge the gap between just being a small business in your community and or, you know, or being something for the community, being a part of the community. I love that.

[Hinton] And I think that you guys are serving an important role and maybe there's some other businesses that might get more involved once they know what Red River oil is really about. As far as Covid-19 goes, I know you mentioned that with the premium sale that's going to change this year. How have you guys survived and adapted during the covered 19 pandemic?

[Wiley] Well, when when Covid started well, when we really started feeling those effects of it here in southwest Arkansas, it was probably the end of March, beginning of April. You know, you go outside or you'd get in your car to go somewhere and there hardly be anybody on the road. There's no cars on the road and there's definitely not any transport trucks out there that need to be filled up. There's not, most people are at home. They're not needing the fuel for their tractors or whatever kind of equipment they're using, the people in the log woods. And so we saw all our fuel numbers drop drastically. First those six to eight weeks during that time when everyone really just wasn't getting out anymore. So to kind of counteract that and try to keep everything going and all of that, we just really focused on reaching out to the customers that we have. Making sure that we are still providing that same quality of service that we pride ourselves on. And just continuing to work with our customers so that they can also survive during this pandemic, because as a small business, when we are a small business, but we're not like, you know, this one man who has a log truck and that's what he has to, he has to haul this wood to be able to survive. And so it's just important for us to be able to make sure that we're staying competitive and doing what we can to also help those other people that are in the same position we are.

[Hinton] And are you guys still able to help out with your community and give back as much even though Covid is going on?

[Wiley] Yes. So we are still donating to everything that we've normally donated to. We're still trying to stay on top of any events that, you know, they need volunteers that we can try to go and, you know, be a part of that. But as we all know, that some of those things have changed this year. A lot of those events are not happening or they're happening differently. So we're just kind of adapted and go with the flow.

[Hinton] Do you have any advice for any business owners out there maybe that want to get involved in their community, but they are maybe holding back because of Covid?

[Wiley] Yeah, I would say don't hold back. I mean, you can't let this. You can't let things hold you back.

[Hinton] You're only going to move forward if you're constantly trying to move forward. I can get down with that, and I thank you so much for your time. And I really appreciate you sitting down with us today. Is there anything else you would like the people listening to know about Red River Oil Company?

[Wiley] Yeah. Yeah. We have locations and Ashdown, Foreman, and Texarkana. We are a full-service fuel bulk plant distributor. You're more than welcome to come to any of our facilities and purchase fuel or oil or lubricant products. Well, we also deliver. So, give us a call and we'll get you taken care of.

[Hinton] Thank you so much, Mallory. We appreciate you.

[Wiley] Thank you.

[Hinton] For more information about this or any Create Bridges podcast or more about Create Bridges, Arkansas, visit uaex.uada.edu/business-communities/strategic-planning/create-bridges. The create Bridges Arkansas podcast is made possible by a Walmart grant to the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Community Professional and Economic Development Unit. And with the cooperation of Spring River Innovation Hub in White River Now productions.