

Press Event

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The Ties that Bind

Friendships and connections are found everywhere at the Syngenta Business Institute

BY ROBERT MEYER / EDITOR IN CHIEF

Put five or six golf course superintendents from the same region at a dinner table, and I guarantee you one thing — they're going to have some common acquaintances.

But it goes much further than "common acquaintances." This (among many other things) was what I learned while attending the seventh-annual Syngenta Business Institute (SBI) last month at the Graylyn International Conference Center, which is a breathtaking and luxurious destination near the campus of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Covering the golf course maintenance industry for just over one year, I'm still a newbie, by far. So when I attend industry events like this one, my learning hat comes on and stays attached to my head. This particular event, a three-day educational seminar, brought together 26 hand-picked superintendents to discuss ways to improve their operations and be better leaders and managers. Guest speakers featured several dignitaries from Wake Forest's School of Business, including Ken Middaugh, Dr. Amy Wallis, Dr. Bill Davis and Dr. Sherry Moss.

The educational sessions presented by this prestigious list of experts allowed

the superintendents to work together to examine the scenarios they face daily, like dealing with people (employees and employers) and financial issues, and provided them with invaluable knowledge to take back to their respective clubs.

But back to the five or six superintendents and what I learned at that dinner table.

I mentioned that these guys, all from Southern states, had several common acquaintances in the business. I also mentioned it goes much further than that. What I mean is, it feels more like a brotherhood, or a fraternity, to me. Everybody knows everybody — and that's good. I've learned that, for the most part, this business has a family atmosphere, where sharing practices, advice, laughs and camaraderie happens more often than I realized.

And it wasn't just at my table that I observed this. At SBI, I noticed it across the board, whether it was superintendents from the South, Midwest, West Coast, or across all the regions.

Everybody knows everybody. There are a lot of lasting friendships between superintendents, friendships that extend way beyond your typical Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon stuff.

And that's just how they like it.

"That's the best part of this business," Matthew Wharton, superintendent at Carolina Golf Club in Charlotte, North Carolina, told me. "I can't imagine doing anything else."

As SBI was wrapping up, I sat down with Bill Keene, superintendent at Blacksburg (Virginia) Country Club, to discuss this topic.

"In my area, I've got a core group of guys," Keene explained to me. "We talk, we text. If you ever have a problem, it's always good to have a resource. It's funny; I heard a preacher say once, 'If you don't understand something, always surround yourself with really smart people and they'll help you figure stuff out.' That's kind of what we do."

I explained to Keene my observation that his profession seemed very tight-knit, and that it seems everybody knows everybody, which creates unique and strong friendships.

"Absolutely," he agreed. "Even at a setting like this, there's 26 of us from Seattle to Florida to New York to Southern California. We all have something in common, a common thread in all of us. It's a bond that ties us together. It's really cool. It's helpful to have people to lean on." ○