

First fruits: Broetje Orchards puts people before profits

by [Stan Friedman](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

When hail wiped out 70 percent of the apple crop at Broetje Orchards in 2006, owners Ralph and Cheryl Broetje and their management team had a decision to make. The insurance company would pay on the business's policy only if no further harvesting was done—no picking of the orchard's fruit. If they agreed, the Broetjes would recover some of their costs, but several hundred of their year-round workers would lose their jobs, and even more migrant workers would be unemployed.

"Somehow we had to keep people working because there are a lot of families depending on us being here every day," recalls warehouse manager Ron Appleby. "So we came up with, 'Let's go ahead and pick the fruit and really forget about the insurance money and hope that God's watching over us a little bit.'" The family kept everyone employed and managed to break even.

The Broetjes, who operate one of the nation's largest privately owned orchards, made the decision on the basis of their philosophy of operating the business as a mission and putting people before profits. They are proving that it is possible to do both in a way that benefits people locally, regionally and globally.

The orchards of nearly 1 million trees stretch across 5,500 acres in western Washington, including 4,300 contiguous acres near Prescott. The business annually packs 5.5 million boxes of fruit in a 1.1-million-square-foot packing and storage facility. The family operates under the brand name FirstFruits in recognition of God's directive to bring to God the first fruits of one's labor and because of its commitment to care for the land and people. The company's goal is to be "a quality fruit company committed to 'bearing fruit that will last.'"

That commitment has led the Broetjes to give away roughly 75 percent of the company's annual profits, even in difficult economic times, including 100 percent of the profits from their cherry orchards.

Several of Ralph and Cheryl's nine children—six are adopted from India—help manage the orchard. Ajay oversees purchasing, Sanjay coordinates several of the fields, Sonya manages the payroll and Trevor coordinates communications. Suzanne is executive director of the Vista Hermosa Foundation, through which the Broetjes direct much of their charitable giving and provide services for their employees.

Though the business is successful now, the Broetjes know what it is to struggle, to nearly lose everything and to have a chance only because of others' compassion. Ralph and Cheryl were just 22 with little farming experience when they purchased their first cherry orchard near Benton City. Just weeks after the Broetjes bought the property, the cherries froze. Rain ruined them a second year, and fruit flies destroyed the crop in the third year. "We were just keeping the trees alive, basically," says Cheryl. The man from whom they had bought the farm gave them leeway in their payments. "He was a real strong committed Christian," Ralph recalls. "He had more faith in me than I did in myself."

Ralph's former Sunday school teacher also helped. "He was one of the few people who showed up in those first three years when we first started farming. He drove down and helped us on weekends. That was an emotional boost." The teacher reminded Ralph of a vision Ralph had at 15 while attending a weekend retreat focused on missions. "I had the wild idea that I would have an apple orchard that would help feed the kids in India," he says. The idea lay dormant for years, but now, says Cheryl, "as we reflect back on that time, we believe that was God calling at 15."

Over the years, the Broetjes added both acres and employees. In 1987, they built warehouses, thus becoming packers and shippers as well as growers. As the business grew, the family considered the impact of their decisions on their employees. When the Broetjes add technology to improve production, they ask themselves how a purchase would enable them to hire more people. For example, they could have purchased highly efficient state-of-the-art machinery when they added another packing line in 2004, but instead they spent \$17 million on technology that was not quite as efficient but which enabled them to add 35 jobs. If they must purchase equipment that displaces workers, the family tries to find other jobs for them in the organization.

As the Broetjes worked side by side with their employees, the needs of the workers became painfully apparent. When the Broetjes saw that many of their employees

were pulling children from school to watch younger brothers and sisters, or leaving kids locked alone in apartments, they determined to provide quality education, housing and training for employees and their families. Today the 126 single-family homes in Vista Hermosa are rented to workers at well below market value. A planned second community will give employees a chance to become first-time homeowners.

An on-site preschool for 60 children is subsidized so no one ever pays more than \$7 of the roughly \$25 cost per day. Ninety-nine percent of the children at Vista Hermosa Elementary School are English-as-a-second-language students, and the state has honored the school for surpassing all of its benchmarks. As Suzanne Broetje says, “The teachers believed their students could do it.” College scholarships are available too.

The Vista Hermosa community also includes a gym, laundry, convenience store, bilingual library and chapel. The Broetjes placed the chapel in the center physically and philosophically. “We knew that probably close to half the families that we would be inviting to live out here had kids that were involved in gangs in the cities,” Ralph says. “The chapel may be the most important piece of the community. It’s really been amazing to see the people and the families grow.”

Employees of different denominations use the chapel throughout the week. “We’re not trying to centralize spiritual power here. We’re trying to disseminate it,” says Cheryl, who does not belong to a particular denomination. “As people have come to a deeper understanding of their relationship with Christ and its impact on their lives, most of them try to find places in the broader community to share that. Many have started up small churches.”

A committee of employees decides where to distribute all the profits from the cherry orchards. When the committee first formed, getting people to serve the two-year terms was difficult, says Ron Appleby, who chairs the committee but has no vote in decisions. “Now there’s a list of people wanting to be involved.” At first, members wanted to send the money back to the communities from which they came. Then the workers saw videos of the poor in other countries. “Now,” says Appleby, the workers “visit the places they are supporting and come back and share that with people.”

The committee is an example of the Broetjes’ belief in a servant-leadership management style. “There are two models of leadership—the power model and the

servant model,” says Cheryl, who has been heavily influenced by Robert Greenleaf, founder of the Servant Leadership movement, and has spoken at his institute. “The power model is: How can I keep a little more power for me? But once you can get past that, it becomes: What can I be for others? How can I lift them up? What do they need, and how can I serve them?”

Cheryl says the family and managers constantly ask themselves, “Because Broetje Orchards is here, are people on the bottom lifted up or are they being further deprived?”

As much as possible, the Broetjes hire from within. Supervisors begin by working on the packing line. Ralph believes in the workers the same way others believed in him. “You try to give them a little bit more each time to watch them grow. Sometimes it’s giving them stuff that they don’t think they can handle,” he says. “Once they’ve accomplished some of their tasks . . . they become really appreciative. Then through servant leadership, they’re knowing how to pass that on and what to look for.”

Reed Bennett, head of food safety and shipping supervisor, says he’s an example of the impact of servant leadership. In 1997, Bennett was living only to get his next methamphetamine fix. When his girlfriend got pregnant, he knew he would have to clean up his life. A series of mutual acquaintances led him to Broetje Orchards. The Broetjes were willing to take a chance on him and gave him a job working on the nightshift dumping spoiled apples into bins. “The person I am today is vastly different than I was in 1997,” says Bennett. “They really do have a lot of love for their employees.”

Each morning at 6 a.m., crew leaders meet in the field with the workers, where they share prayer concerns as well as discuss the day’s work schedule. They also pray for the Broetjes, who join them. “I’ve become so close to the people working here on the farm and their struggles,” says Ralph. “They’ve got everybody and everything going against them.”

Cheryl Broetje sums up the family’s values and the philosophy that created Broetje Orchards: “I think we as white people still remain so unconscious of our white privilege,” Cheryl says. “We have visas and tools and opportunities we didn’t earn. We were just born here. Now what [the workers] do have—what they have brought here—is an incredible spirit, a spirit that wants to work, that wants to give whatever they have to the community. They may not have much, but what they have, they share. What these people bring has enabled us to pull off something that we

couldn't have imagined ourselves.”