

Audio Transcript, K&K Tiny but Mighty Popcorn

GENE MEALHOW, Shellsburg, Popcorn Producer

There's a million stories when you grow up on a farm.

Hi, I'm Gene Mealhow. I live in Shellsburg, Iowa. I'm with K & K, Tiny but Mighty Popcorn. I'm a life-long farmer, third-generation. My passion is agriculture and healthy foods for healthy people. When I talk to people about how I got into the popcorn business, I always tell people I actually wanted to be a rock 'n roll star. That didn't work out.

I ended up getting married at the age of 19 and decided that agriculture was a pretty stable business, and that's where I wanted to raise my family. So I got involved with my father and my uncle, and it was a two-farm operation, four families. During the late eighties, agriculture went through a huge turmoil where some decisions had to be made, and my father and my uncle—actually we convinced them that they had worked their life long and that they deserved something—that we should probably sell the farm and they could retire out.

I ended up purchasing 33 acres here on the Shellsburg farm and decided to become an organic farmer. I became an organic farmer and became the weed farmer of Benton County because I didn't know what the devil I was doing. At the time when I got into this, colleges weren't really looking at it. Now, today, Iowa State has got an extensive program with a research farm, which—in fact, some of the projects there I've worked with.

Ended up running into a company that I ended up going to work for after I met up with them. They taught me a lot. Got into it, learned quite a bit from this company, and

one of my first customers, as a consultant, was this guy with this unique popcorn. He hired me on as a consultant to see if I couldn't help with the production. Turned his crop around the first year.

I kind of got a passion for the corn because it was really neat. It was completely unique and different. I'd never seen anything like it. And after working with him for about five years, he decided that he was going to sell the business and retire. I ended up buying the business from him, and we moved it to our farm here at Shellsburg. I guess that's a long answer to a short question, how I got in the popcorn business.

You know, in your life, as you go through life, there's all kinds of opportunities and directions you go. And as you get older, you know, what maybe wasn't so important to you when you were younger, becomes more important to you. And, you know, I think if there was one thing I would say, I look at the health of the country and the health of our young children. And I see what heart disease is going to be doing to our young kids, and cancer and diabetes.

Organics is not just about, you know, not using chemicals, which is important, and not polluting our streams. But it's about producing foods that are minerally balanced, which leads to healthier people, healthier animals, and then less disease.

And now I have a product that I am marketing directly from my farm to the people. And I have the opportunity to grow that product, manufacture it, take it to the store, stand there and demo t to the people, and explain to them why this product is different. And it's just not taste. I mean everybody loves the taste, but it's just not different in the taste. It's healthy for you to eat.

And I guess that's the passion that I have, is once I learned how important the soils and the mineralization is to our health, I want to get out there and tell people about it. People are wondering, "Why are we all sick? Why are we all sick?" It boils right back down: We are what you eat. And we can only eat what we produce here. And how it's produced is directly going to be related to our health.