

STONYFIELD CEO GIVES RIVIER STUDENTS FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Gary Hirshberg discusses business, consumer choices as activism



Stonyfield Farm president Gary Hirshberg shakes hands with Steve Fiore '13 after a conversation about students' power to influence business through their purchasing decisions.

During a fall First Year Seminar program, Stonyfield Farm president and CEO Gary Hirshberg told Rivier students that when he graduated from college in the 1970s, he wanted nothing to do with business. “I saw business as the root of all evil—it was the reason I could no longer see the ocean from the top of Mount Washington or eat fish I caught in New Hampshire.”

Hirshberg went to work for a nonprofit researching sustainable agriculture and energy solutions. Though the organization had great results, Hirshberg realized that they weren't reaching the public. A visit to an agricultural exhibit at Epcot Center's Land Pavilion changed his thinking. The exhibit, sponsored by Kraft, showed 25,000 people a day an agricultural process that relied on fertilizers

and chemicals, shipping waste to “that place called Away,” Hirshberg said. “I decided I wanted to create a business the size of Kraft with the power to reach people with a positive message about the environment.”

When the federal government cut funding for agricultural research and solar energy programs, Hirshberg had a friend running an organic farming school who suddenly needed to find new sources of income. Samuel Kaymen decided to sell yogurt he was making and asked Hirshberg to help launch the business.

Stonyfield didn't have money for the slotting fees grocery stores charge to provide retail space for products, but Hirshberg managed to get in-store trials handing out samples. “We didn't know what we were going to do for advertising,” Hirshberg said. The company launched an adopt-a-cow program—each customer who sent in five yogurt lids got a certificate and letters from their cow. When 85,000 people adopted cows, Hirshberg and Kaymen realized that word of mouth was working for them.

Today, Stonyfield Farm is a \$330 million company and the world's largest organic yogurt-maker. The company connected with people over environmental issues, handing out samples in train stations in Chicago to thank commuters for riding trains to reduce carbon emissions and encouraging motorists in Texas to keep their tires inflated to get maximum fuel efficiency.

“We built our brand in a very unusual way,” Hirshberg said. “I learned that when you make a better product, do the right thing and give back, when you're authentic and don't try to fool anyone...that drives sales.”

Hirshberg recognizes the irony in his career. “I thought the last thing I wanted to do was business, and I found that I love business,” he said. “Business can be a force for good.” He told students that they control our food system—through their purchases, they can increase demand for certain products.

“Whether you go into business or not, you're powerful as consumers. When you make a decision to buy green, you're exercising incredible power,” Hirshberg said.

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Students said the presentation encouraged them to think in new ways. Freshman Steve Fiore said, “I felt really inspired, educated on facts and things I didn’t know.” He said he didn’t realize the natural label on food packaging is essentially meaningless; knowing that the organic seal is more legitimate, he’ll walk through the grocery store with new eyes.

Spencer Nozell ’13 was inspired by the fact that “a guy who makes millions of dollars started out bankrupt.” He said that his family of eight recognizes the importance of eating healthy rather than cheap. His mother has taught him to choose products with healthier ingredients, a practice Nozell plans to continue after college when he starts his own family.

Hirshberg’s presentation was part of Rivier’s First Year seminar program, which encourages students to reflect on what it means to be an individual in today’s society and consider their responsibility for others. ■