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Lost In The Maize

By Benjamin Pomerance

Kayleigh Bell loves telling people to get lost. As the youngest staff member at Bell's Corn Maze, delivering people into the yawning mouth of the family labyrinth is just part of an average day on the job. "I bring them to the entrance and tell them to have fun," Kayleigh says, smiling proudly. "Of course, if they do get really lost, sometimes I have to go out and help guide them back to the parking lot."

Good thing, too. There are five acres of dirt-lined trails winding around this Chazy, N.Y. cornfield, and every twist and turn looks remarkably like the last. Tall spires of feed corn confront you on all sides, making it impossible to see anything but soil, stalks and sky. Since the corn maze opened for its inaugural year of business this summer, more than one stout-hearted adventurer has been pleased to see Kayleigh arriving, smile on her face and exit map in hand.

"It's a challenge," says Matt Bell, the corn maze co-owner who doubles as Kayleigh's father. "But it's not so challenging that it stops being fun. We've had people of all ages come out here since we opened, and as far as I know, every single one of them has gone away with a smile on their face."

Fifty miles south of the Bell's agricultural adventure, Tom Tucker has compiled his own list of escapades in the corn field. Owner of the Gabriels, N.Y. Great Adirondack Corn Maze since 2004, Tucker knows plenty of people who have bravely ventured into his six-acre swath of green and yellow, not to resurface for the next three hours. "We always tell people that we can't tell them how long it will take to complete the maze," Tucker says. "It's an adventure. If you found your way in ten minutes, it wouldn't be any fun. Getting lost is what keeps people coming back."

Since their arrival on the agro-tourism scene in the early-1990s, over 600 mazes of maize have sprung up across the United States, particularly in the northeast U.S. There are corn maze guide books, corn maze "how-to" tutorials, corn maze Web sites and even a National Corn Maze Association.

"If you had asked me three or four years ago about my future plans, I don't think owning a corn maze would have been at the top of my list," Bell says. "But when we started looking for some ways to expand what we do on our farm, people told us we'd be crazy if we didn't turn our cornfield into a maze. So we tried it and I'm awfully glad that we did. It's opened the door to a whole new experience."

It's also opened the door to a great deal of work, a point on which both area maze owners emphatically agreed. For the Bell family, the planning process for their new maze began last winter, when dinner table conversations became dominated by talk of drafting and design. After finally settling on a serpentine scheme of five jack-o-lanterns, Matt, a draftsman by trade, sketched the basic design onto a sheet of graph paper. "Once we had that we felt like we were on our way," he reminisces.

Tucker was standing nervously in Matt Bell's shoes, a corn maze rookie looking to add some extra business to the family potato farm. He had thoroughly researched the process of corn maze design and had a rough idea about the shape of the maze he wanted to create. There was only one problem. Tom Tucker didn't have any corn.

"We're a potato farm," Tucker explains. "My family has owned this farm since 1863, and we never had a real cornfield. So I really had to start from scratch, planting acres and acres of corn before I could do anything. Then, when the corn came up, the real work began."

For Matt Bell, the work meant a unique father-daughter bonding experience with Kayleigh. Father's Day 2007 was spent counting every single row in corn in the field, a process that still makes Kayleigh grimace to this day. The experience left its mark on her father, too. "We kept losing count," Matt says, shaking his head. "Thankfully, we tied a marker after every hundred rows, so we could always go back to our last marker and start over."

Tom Tucker also had a work crew that was very close to home. "Three brothers, all of them engineers," he grins. "It was a beautiful thing." Together, the quartet prepared a tractor design over the six-acre field—and discovered that they, too, were hooked on corn. Four years later, all of the Tucker boys work at the maze, with Tom and Steve living on site and the other two siblings returning home to help whenever possible. "It's addicting," Tom explains. "It's not just challenging to the visitors—it's tough on the owners, too."

The Bell family soon realized just how tough it could get. Friends would often drive by around 10 p.m. and see Matt or his wife, Colleen, perched atop a John Deere tractor, diligently grooming the corn. "Still," Matt says, "there were a few nights there where we wondered why we were doing this."

Three months later, the doubts are gone. Bell's Corn Maze is now in full operation. Two hundred and fifty people ventured into (and out of) the maze in the first weekend alone. Since then, they've been averaging a steady average of 400 paying customers per weekend, not counting the frequent visits by Kayleigh and her two brothers.

The Tuckers, too, are enjoying the harvest of their labors. Four years after their first opening day jitters, the maze is larger and more elaborate than ever before, complex enough that all four Tucker brothers got lost in it while cutting the corn this summer. With features from hour-long wagon rides to flashlight maze visits every Friday night to a special haunted maze on Oct. 27, people have plenty to keep them occupied on visits. Yet it is the maze itself — now sporting a medieval castle design created by local cartoonist Scott Rhoe — that has become an institution in Gabriels and beyond, with visitors often driving more than 50 miles for a day in the cornfield.

"It's not easy to convince people to drive off the beaten path to go visit a farm," Tom Tucker explains, "but we're managing. And we're also having a lot more fun than we ever imagined."

As their first year of business draws to a close, Matt Bell says he hopes to someday be as established as the Gabriels maze. All signs point to them being well on their way. Bell's Corn Maze also boasts their share of special attractions, from flashlight nights on Fridays and Saturdays to hayrides to the family pumpkin patch to "Halloween Fright Nights" on Oct. 13 and 27. Still, Matt believes the maze's appeal goes beyond any event they can offer.

"It's something different, it's something fun, and it's something people can do as a family," Matt says. "You don't have so many of those purely fun activities any more. We've had elementary schoolers here, we've had grandparents here, and we've had everyone in between, and they've all enjoyed it." He pauses, gesturing to the trailer that houses the family's new operation. "And then you have us. We're already making plans to make next year even better, and we're having a blast doing it. You know, in the end, that's what this is all about."

Bell's Corn Maze is located on 499 Ratta Road in Chazy, N.Y., and will remain open for visitors until

Oct. 28. Hours are Friday, 5:00 to 9:00 p.m.; Saturday, noon until 9:00 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 5:00 p.m. Admission is \$5 per person (children 4 and under are free). For more information, call (518) 846-8586.

Tucker's Great Adirondack Corn Maze is located at the Tucker Family Farm on Route 86 in the hamlet of Gabriels, N.Y, and will remain open for visitors until Oct. 31. Hours are Thursday through Sunday, from 1:00 p.m. to dusk (except for Friday Flashlight Nights, when the maze remains open until 10:00 p.m.). Admission is \$8 for adults and \$6 for children 4-12 yrs. old (children 3 and under are free). For more information, call (518) 637-1230 or visit www.tuckertaters.com.