

"Dear Me"

Reflections on Careers in Hardware

Do you remember your first day on the job?

Perhaps you were just a kid, following your dad around, sweeping the floors and stocking the shelves at the family business. Or maybe you were in college and you went to apply at the local hardware store for a part-time job.

No matter where you were when you began, the goals and dreams you had envisioned for yourself when you started your hardware career have undoubtedly changed with the passing of time. Are there things you wish you'd done differently? Or do you see the path you carved as what led you to where you are today?

Hardware Retailing invited four retailers who are in different phases of their careers to write letters to their younger selves. We spoke with someone who is new to the industry, two who have established their careers, and one who is reflecting from retirement.

In these letters, you'll see the growth and lessons each person has learned during their experiences along the retailing journey. ➔

NRHA Staffers Look Back

The North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA) staff also wanted to join in on the fun and reflect on their time spent working for the association.

To do this, four different people, including a former publisher and three other faces from headquarters you'll likely recognize, also sat down to reflect on where they've gone in their careers and what the industry has meant to them over the years.

Visit TheRedT.com/Dear-Me-NRHA to read letters from the following individuals:

- **Bob Vereen**, former publisher
- **Bill Lee**, president and CEO
- **Scott Wright**, executive director—
Retail Leadership Institute
- **Kate Klein**, assistant editor

Camille Gibson
Operations Manager
Mark's Ace Hardware
Tucson, Arizona

Age: 27 years old

Time in Industry: 8 years

Dear younger self,

Can you imagine growing up to be the operations manager of a hardware store? I bet that seems obscure right now because you have no hardware retail experience, nor any practice in running a business, but believe it or not, it's going to happen. During your freshman year of college, Mark Rios will hire you as a part-time cashier at Mark's Ace Hardware. Over the next eight years, your hard work and dedication will lead you into obtaining various roles such as paint manager, supervisor, assistant manager and ultimately operations manager.

The path you will take in acquiring this job does not come easy. Not growing up in the hardware industry means you will have so much to learn in a short amount of time. Listen to your managers, coworkers, and customers; they will teach you a large amount of product knowledge that will lead to your success. When you go home, research the answers to the questions you didn't know. Practice hands-on projects at home so you can speak confidently.

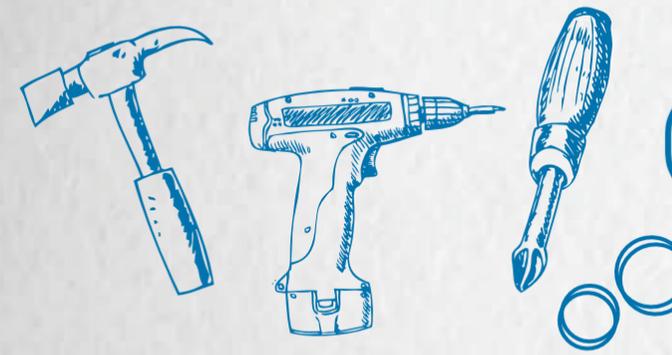
Another challenge you will face is being a young female in a male-dominated industry. Some customers are skeptical of a female giving them advice at a hardware store. Your drive to learn will help you overcome this challenge. When your uncles are coating the roof at your grandma's house or tearing a wall down at your mom's, go with them and help them. When you want to understand the difference between the paint lines you sell, paint each room in your house with a different product. Your desire to have the right answers will help you gain confidence in yourself and your knowledge, allowing your customers to have faith in you.

You will become a manager at the young age of 22. You now have to focus on learning how to manage people, some more than three times your age and some who were previously your supervisors. Mark is such a great role model. He will teach you to take good care of your employees, which will encourage the employees to take good care of the customers.

I have many words of encouragement for you: You must learn to be confident in yourself and your abilities. There is nothing you are incapable of doing or learning, and you are making the right decisions. Always be willing to learn, because knowledge is power. You will not be successful if you do not have the drive to progress. When you learn, share the information. Pay attention to your hardworking mother, because even though you do not realize it now, you will see that she raised you to have strong work ethics that shape your future.

Most importantly, make sure you love what you do. You may not have imagined you would be running a hardware store. Be proud on your first day, because this is just the beginning.

Sincerely,
Camille Gibson



Your desire to have the right answers will help you gain confidence in yourself and your knowledge, allowing your customers to have faith in you.



Be proud on your first day, at Mark's Ace Hardware because it's just the beginning.



Early on, you had no knowledge of paint. Three years later, you managed the department.



As a female, you love when you can prove your product knowledge to skeptical customers.



Working with the entire team at Mark's Ace Hardware is by far your favorite part of the job.

Tony Brookhouse
Co-owner and COO
Koopman Lumber
7 Massachusetts locations
Age: 49 years old
Time in Industry: 20 years

Hey Tony,

It's spring of 1996 and you're 29 years old. Now, fast-forward 20 years. You've built a life and a career in the home improvement industry. How did this happen?

You and your wife will leave Grand Rapids, Michigan, to move to Whitinsville, Massachusetts, with your newborn son. This will be the result of your father-in-law asking you if you'd like to become partners with your brother-in-law to work toward taking over the family business, Koopman Lumber.

Over the years, you'll see the results of your hard work. You won't see it right away, but when the company is moving in the right direction, it will show. Another rewarding aspect will be your ability to offer career opportunities. Now you have 80 employees. In 2016, you'll have 248.

Will there be difficulties? Of course. It'll be hard to balance your work and personal life. As an owner of a hardware, lumber and paint business, you're always on call. You handle it by embracing it as a part of your life. Business employees are your extended family, and you treat them as such. It's a privilege to have that responsibility.

The hardest part of your career will be putting the puzzle together correctly. Placing the right people in the right roles and creating or eliminating roles is tough. You'll make decisions that you wish you could change. You'll hire people who don't fit the company culture. It will be disruptive, anti-productive and a very big mistake. You'll regret opportunities you didn't jump on soon enough. You'll also regret having to let some people go during the Great Recession. And there will be times you wish you'd thought more and talked less.

There are three things I want you to take away from this letter. The first is to start praying more, and earlier. Next, surround yourself with smart people who have integrity. And finally, get your MBA.

Get involved in the industry. You will learn from all of the great retailers out there. Don't be afraid to fail. Keep your foot on the gas, and keep reinvesting in the business. It helps to attract good talent, and people notice.

You can do it! Go for it!
Tony Brookhouse

Business employees are your extended family, and you treat them as such. It's a privilege to have that responsibility.



There's plenty of work involved when you own a business, but that work will pay off.



Here's a look at the exterior of one of your stores in Sharon, Massachusetts.

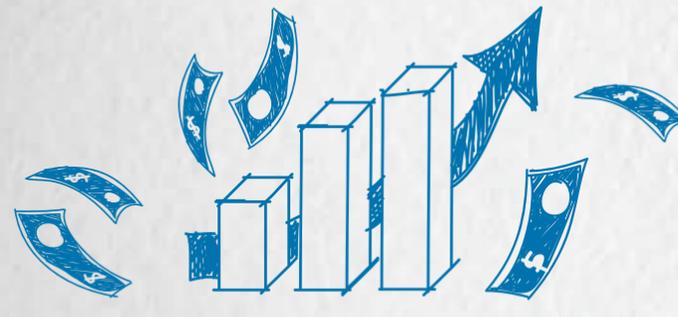


Take time to get to know your employees and other retailers in the industry.



Here's your headshot from the time you served on the NRHA Board of Directors.

Dick Thomes
Owner
Thomes Bros. Hardware
& Appliances
Arlington, Minnesota
Age: 63 years old
Time in Industry: 51 years



I have been in business for quite some time now, one thing will always be a challenge: cash flow

To a Younger Me,

Growing up in the family of one of the owners of Thomes Bros., I started working on Saturdays at the age of 12. When I began, I was paid \$2 per day: \$1 for the morning and \$1 for the afternoon. Times have changed, but the store has always been a part of my life.

Early on, my personal life revolved around work. Then my three kids worked at the store after I bought it. The kids were active in school, but when they had free time, they were at work with me. As they got older and the business became more stable, we spent more time away from the store together. One of my favorite memories is working in the store with my family, as kids and later when they became adults.

I have been in business for quite some time now, but one thing will always be a challenge: cash flow! I purchased the store with \$5,000 in my checkbook, and five months later, I had \$50,000. Thirty days later, I had to borrow money. I was at a meeting three years after I purchased the store, and someone asked when cash flow improves. An old-time dealer shouted out from the back of the room, "NEVER!"

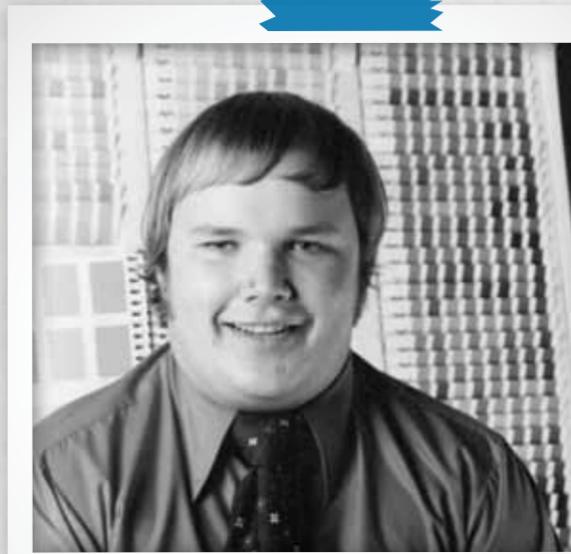
One of the things I am glad I did but also wish I would have done more of is learn from other retailers. I was very active in our state hardware association, as well as NRHA, and learned so much from the other board members. The value of the time I spent on the boards and the friendships I made are priceless.

Here are a couple things I have learned over the years: 1. Listen to your customers, listen to your employees and listen to your wife; and 2. Don't be afraid to borrow money; that's an important part of running a business.

I was once told, "Don't panic. It always works out," and that was some of the best advice I have ever received. I had many sleepless nights over issues that always worked out, but at the time, I couldn't see how they were going to be resolved.

While there are things I've regretted and things I've learned, I want you to know that if you work hard, everything will work out fine. Always give it your best shot. When you get older, remember that change is good. Be willing to change your inventory, your way of doing your job and anything else about your business—except your integrity and honesty.

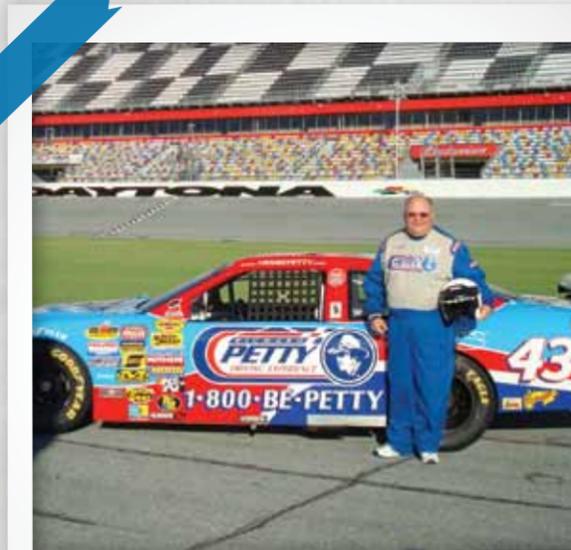
Sincerely,
Dick Thomes



At 18 years old, your life is ahead of you.



You enjoy family time in and out of work.



When you spend time away, have fun!



Life changes, but the store is a constant.

Dale Townsend
Retired, Former Owner
Townsend Building Supply
Alabama and Florida

Age: 69 years old

Time in Industry: 40 years

Hi young Dale,

Remember when you started working part-time for Dad's store during high school? That was the first time you drew a paycheck, making 50 cents per hour. You thought you were rich! By age 14, you knew you wanted a career with the family business. In 1974, Mom and Dad sold you the business. You were 27 years old at the time, and in hindsight, you didn't have a clue.

Over the years, you'll develop meaningful relationships with employees, customers and vendor representatives. You'll share ups and downs together, while watching each other's lives grow.

One of the most rewarding parts of your life will be watching your sons learn and grow in the business. The memory of when your eldest son tells you he wants to come back to the business after college will stay with you forever. Once both of your boys take over, the operation will grow from two to six locations in only a few years. They'll do things you'll never ever think of doing to expand the business. There's something very special about moving into the third generation of family involvement in the business.

My advice to you would be to enjoy life a little more. The years fly by so quickly, and in hindsight, I wish I had taken more time off. Be willing to pay for top-notch talent. At times, I could have hired better people if I had just looked at it as an investment instead of an expense.

When it's time to retire, hire a consultant a few years out to help plan the succession. You'll want to partially retire, and only work part-time. But the consultant will help you understand that as long as you're around in any capacity, you'll be viewed as the boss, instead of your sons. Get out of their way. There's no question in their ability to run the business. They have new ideas, and you'll be mired too much in the past and stuck on how things have always been done. You'll set a date to retire, and it will be your 65th birthday. You'll walk out the door and will stay completely away for several weeks. It will end up being the best thing for you, your sons and the business. You'll refuse to talk with customers or employees about the business, and will refer them to your sons. You won't meddle in your sons' business, but if you're asked for advice, you'll always give it.

All my best,
Dale Townsend

My advice to you would be to enjoy life a little more. The years fly by so quickly, and in hindsight, I wish I had taken more time off.



My father, Austin (right), sold the business to me in 1974 after 30 years of ownership.



My two sons, Michael (left) and Turner (right), are now the third-generation owners.



Here I am carving a turkey during an open house at the Ozark, Alabama, store in 2010.



An exterior shot of the Ozark, Alabama, store, one of the six store locations.