

Raised in Retail

NRHA Chairman Megan Menzer Never Doubted Where Her Career Path Would Lead

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If you could ask 10-year-old Megan Menzer what she wanted to be when she grew up, you might be surprised by her answer. She wouldn't rattle off the typical vocations like doctor, astronaut or veterinarian. No, even at 10 years old, little Megan knew her career would lie in hardware retailing.

She had seen generations of women before her who were actively involved in the family's hardware business, and in between her playtime and homework, Megan would dream of the day when she would add her name to the list of strong women who sat at the helm of Newton's True Value, the family business based in Cherryvale, Kansas.

Menzer, who is now co-owner and president of the two-store operation, was so confident about her career path that while other kids were playing video games, she would head to the store's back office to practice her 10-key skills.

"I wasn't necessarily like the other kids," Menzer recalls. "I liked to go in the office and practice on the 10-key just to see how fast I could get. Most other kids didn't even know

what a 10-key was, but I would practice using it with both my left hand and right hand."

So when her father, Joe, came home from work one summer afternoon and found Megan playing in the front yard, she was thrilled when he asked the question she had been waiting years to hear: "Would you like to start working at the store?"

"I remember it like it was yesterday," Menzer says. "I remember him getting out of his truck, walking up to me and asking if I would like to start working at the store two days a week. I was in fifth grade at the time, and I just couldn't have been more excited."

Today, more than three decades after Menzer accepted her first job with Newton's True Value, she has made quite a career out of running the business that was founded by her great-grandparents and later run by her great-grandmother, Grace Newton.

Despite the business being nearly 100 years old, Menzer has overseen the operation during some of its most dramatic changes, including complete resets, product additions and an expansion into a second location in nearby Independence, Kansas.





During this time, she has also taken an active role in helping other retailers succeed, working with shop-local organizations, serving on her co-op's marketing advisory group, and in one of her most prominent roles, as chairman of the board of directors for the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA).

"I love this industry, and I am so blessed to have made my career in it," Menzer says. "I think NRHA is such a great representation of the industry as a whole, because it's about retailers helping one another. It's not about True Value or Orgill or Ace or Do it Best. It's about all of us being independent small business owners and learning from each other to make our operations and communities stronger."

The editors at *Hardware Retailing* recently had the opportunity to sit down with Menzer and learn a little about her history, her business and her thoughts on the future of independent home improvement retailing.

A Focus on Family

Since the business was founded in 1924 by Menzer's great-grandparents, Grace and Earl Newton, the operation has been a family affair. Eventually, Grace and Earl passed the business down to their daughter Nellie, who worked in the business with her husband, Albert.

During these early years, Newton's True Value was primarily focused on plumbing, electrical and heating supplies. It wasn't until 1976, when Menzer's father, Joe Long, entered the business, that hardware began to take a more prominent role in the store's offering.

Like most small business owners, running Newton's True Value was always a family affair. Both Joe and his wife Barbara are still active in the business and, in addition to Megan, both her sisters, Cari and Tessie, worked the aisles of



Left: Though her husband, **Jeff Menzer**, isn't involved in the day-to-day operations at **Newton's True Value**, **Megan Menzer** says his support for her and the business has been a big part of their overall success.

Above: **Megan Menzer** credits her father, **Joe Long**, as one of the key influences in her retail development.

Newton's at some point. But Joe always knew that Menzer had a particular passion for the operation.

"Megan just loved being part of Newton's," Joe says. "Her sisters aren't involved today, but Megan just took to it, and she's really a natural. Whenever she's in the store, she has customers running up to her and giving her hugs."

Even during her early years at the store, Menzer says she has nothing but fond memories of working with both her immediate family and her extended family, which included employees and customers.

"The employees were just always so kind to us," she says. "I remember Gary Simpson, who had worked at the store for a long time, and how he would put up with us three girls running around. I even remember locking him in the paint room one day and thinking it was so funny. He didn't find it quite as funny, but he took it all in stride. It was like a big family."

Menzer also says she cherishes the opportunity she had to work with her grandmother, Nellie.

"My grandmother and I would work together on the bookkeeping. We would spread everything out on the dining room table, and I would help organize things for the invoices, and then I would get to lick all the envelopes," she says.



A Budding Career

After working summers and vacations at the store during high school, Menzer went on to college, where she earned her degree in business management and marketing, always with the intent of returning to Cherryvale.

Immediately after graduation, she came back to the family business and set to work learning the management ropes from her father. For the father-daughter team, there was an urgency in getting her up to speed on every aspect of the operation.

"My grandfather passed away unexpectedly when he was 59 years old, so my dad, at the age of 32, had to take over running every part of the business," Menzer recalls. "Because we knew how difficult that was, we wanted to make sure we were prepared should anything ever occur."

This intensive training quickly gave Menzer the insight she needed on operations, and in short order, she became an integral part of running the business. "Megan was very quickly more of a partner than an employee," Joe says.

After returning to the business, however, the partnership almost dissolved. Menzer recalls a brief period where she thought about branching out from Cherryvale and the potential decision to pursue a different career path.



From its origins as a supplier of plumbing, heating and electrical items, **Newton's True Value** has evolved to meet the needs of a more diverse customer base and today has two locations offering full selections of hardlines.

Menzer was called in to a job interview with what was, at the time, a relatively new company called Amazon. When she showed up for the meeting, she found out she would be interviewing for a job as an assistant to the president and CEO. For someone with a college degree and experience working in a family business, Menzer says this opportunity held little appeal.

"My dad and I joke about it now," she says. "Kind of like 'What might have been?' I went in for the interview, and they actually brought in Jeff Bezos [the founder of Amazon], but when



Menzer's freedom to make changes and decisions undoubtedly helped the business prosper, and in 2005 ... she was selected as one of the NRHA's Young Retailer of the Year Award winners.

I found out it was to be his assistant, I was like, 'No way, I have a college degree. I don't want to be someone's assistant.' After that, I was pretty sure I wanted to stay in the family business."

So instead of having Jeff Bezos as a mentor, Menzer returned to Cherryvale, where she continued to learn from her father. And from her perspective, she couldn't have asked for a better role model. "We work very well together," she says. "It was never, 'You can't do that;' it was always, 'Let's try it, and if it doesn't work, how do we learn from it?' I have been very blessed to have such a great mentor."

Menzer's freedom to make changes and decisions undoubtedly helped the business prosper, and in 2005, her hard work and dedication were recognized when she was selected as one of the NRHA's Young Retailer of the Year Award winners.

Since winning the award, she has continually focused on improving Newton's True Value.

From becoming early adopters for in-store and online technologies to opening a second location, Menzer and the Newton's team continue to look for ways to better meet customers' needs.

And though she had grown up coming to NRHA and True Value conventions, the award was what really spurred her relationship with the association and served as a catalyst to get her more involved.

We're Stronger Together

When she first joined the NRHA board of directors in 2009, Menzer didn't have to learn about the value of giving back to the industry. For years, she watched her father's relationship grow with both True Value and NRHA.

"I was raised in an era when you belonged to things," says Joe. "You wanted to be a part of a community that was bigger than the four walls of your store, and I remember my grandmother talking about the value of being part of the association."

Joe says his involvement with hardware associations helped him broaden his view of the industry. "I remember Marvin Franks, who was a representative with the hardware association, who would call on us. I remember being at a True Value convention and Marvin asking if I wanted to go to dinner with him. I had never thought of leaving the convention to go out to dinner, but we did. And from that point, it really broadened my horizons."

Given this firsthand exposure to the value of associations, when Menzer was elected to the board of directors, she wanted to make sure her involvement would count.



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—Megan Menzer, Newton's True Value

“As I got more involved in NRHA and realized I had a voice in the direction of the association, and I fully understood that NRHA was about helping all independent home improvement dealers. I really saw the value,” Megan says. “I wanted to share my own experiences with others and let them know that even though they are independents, they don’t have to face their challenges alone. The association is here to help.”

Menzer says she can point to multiple occasions since joining the NRHA board where her network of peers have proven to be valuable allies. “When we opened our second store, I had other NRHA members offering to help me, share information, send me documents, even come down to help. The support I got was truly overwhelming.”

During her time on the board of directors, some of the accomplishments Menzer is most proud of involve expanding the reach of NRHA’s peer relationships with programs like the Retail Management Certification Program, Retail Roundtable groups and the State of Independents Conference.

“Megan has been a fantastic contributor to our board throughout the years,” says Bob Cutter,

NRHA’s chief operating officer. “Even prior to joining the board, Megan was always active at NRHA events and has been a big cheerleader for everything we do.”

Of all the programs she has been involved in during her tenure, Menzer has a hard time naming just one that she takes particular pride in, but she feels that playing a role in the acquisition and opening of the new NRHA headquarters and conference center would certainly be among them.

“The building is a huge accomplishment and a big step forward for the association, and to have some small part in that is incredibly gratifying,” Megan says. “That’s honestly how I feel about my entire experience on the board. I have grown so much businesswise and personally through the organization, and you get exposed to so many people who you might not ever know. To be some part of launching programs or meeting other retailers, when you sit back and think about it, it is truly humbling.” ■

In addition to her involvement in the family business, **Megan Menzer** has also taken on roles within the industry advocating for independent business owners.

