

A Taste of Independence

Hardware Operations Shine on Annual Road Trip

As an independent retailer, you most likely strive to patronize other local businesses in your community. From quirky coffee shops to independent book stores, it's important to support independent establishments. When you venture away from your hometown for a vacation, do you seek opportunities to experience the world around you from a local, independent perspective?

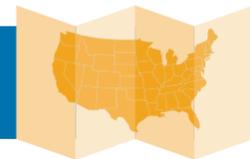
I've worked at the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA) for five years, and over that time, I have become more aware of how important it is to shop local. As the retail outreach coordinator for NRHA, I have an even greater understanding of the power of independent businesses.

In March, I joined small-business advocacy group Independent We Stand for its annual road trip as an

NRHA representative. The Great American Red, White & Q Road Trip marked my fourth time on a weeklong journey with the group. We traveled over 1,000 miles, visiting some of the best cities for barbecue, including Asheville, North Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; Memphis, Tennessee; St. Louis and Kansas City, Missouri. During the trip, we stayed in locally owned hotels, ate at local restaurants and visited a variety of independent businesses. I especially enjoyed touring the home improvement stores.

To read my daily blog posts from the trip and gain ideas on local spots to visit if you're ever in those cities, visit [TheRedT.com/IWS-road-trip-2019](https://www.theredt.com/IWS-road-trip-2019).

On the following pages, explore the independent home improvement businesses we visited, and add these stores to your hardware store bucket list the next time you pass through.



Town Hardware & General Store Black Mountain, North Carolina



To kick off the weeklong road trip, Independent We Stand and NRHA staffer Renee Changnon visited **Beth** (left) and **Peter Ballhausen** (center) of **Town Hardware & General Store** in Black Mountain, North Carolina.

Entering into Town Hardware & General Store in Black Mountain, North Carolina, feels like you're taking a step back in time as you walk on the creaking wood floors. The hardware and general store features a tin ceiling and wooden installations throughout. Adding to the character, the old-fashioned store occupies three historic buildings dating back to the 1920s.

According to owners Peter and Beth Ballhausen, the store opened in 1928 and has always been locally owned and operated. The business has been passed between several families over the years. The Ballhausens purchased the business in 2013, and they say it belongs to the community it has been apart of for nearly a century.

“Americans should support locally owned businesses because ... we are putting money directly into our local institutions, which helps the community.”

—Beth Ballhausen,
Town Hardware & General Store

“We quickly learned that this store is ‘owned’ by the community and that we, just as the previous owners, are simply caretakers of the business,” Beth says. “Town Hardware has become something far bigger and more important than the physical store. It is part of the fabric of this town and we are honored to be a small part of its history.”

While it includes all the items someone would need from a hardware store, Town Hardware & General Store is also known for offering a wide selection of goods, from houseware items and classic toys to locally made jams sold in the store. There is even an upstairs loft area called the Book Nook, where children's books are displayed and shoppers can look down over the entire store with a bird's-eye view.

When asked their thoughts on supporting independent businesses, Beth talked about how their company thrives on that mission. Beth said supporting other independent businesses is a critical component for her team.

“Americans should support locally owned businesses because as a community retailer, we hire local people, we bank with a local bank and we hire people to do work for our store and business from a local setting,” Beth says. “We are putting money directly into our local institutions, which helps the community.”

To learn more about the business, read a more in-depth profile at TheRedT.com/town-hardware.



Flanagan Paint & Supply Creve Coeur, Missouri

Residents of St. Louis and surrounding communities have been turning to Flanagan Paint & Supply since 1950 for top-quality products, competitive prices and the best service. The business was purchased in 2007 by the Donnelly family, and there are currently two locations: one in Ellisville, Missouri, and the other in Creve Coeur, Missouri, which is where our road trip stopped during our journey.

While at the store, we met owner Jim Donnelly, who shared how he was introduced to the store he now owns after spending years in the paint industry as a sales representative. The family business also includes the second generation, with Jim's son Jay overseeing sales operations, providing exceptional customer service to their customers.

The Creve Coeur store is a well-lit, beautifully merchandised store with a vibrant green sign displaying Flanagan Paint & Supply behind its service counter. When customers walk in, the associates are quick to step in and help customers find what they need.

For Jim, running an independent paint store has been a rewarding experience for a variety of reasons, including the relationships formed.

“The box stores have led to our best customers because we help fix their mistakes. You never know who will wait on you in a big box.”

—Jim Donnelly, *Flanagan Paint & Supply*

“I enjoy the fact that my customers have become my friends,” Donnelly says. “I always said our business is making friends in service and honesty, and if we do that, we'll do fine.”

When customers and friends ask if big-box stores put pressure on his two-store operation, Jim says it often has the opposite effect and has helped bring new customers through his doors.

“The box stores have led to our best customers because we help fix their mistakes,” Donnelly says. “You never know who will wait on you in a big box. My team and I get to be there to help our customers and become a place for them to come that they trust.”



While visiting the various independent businesses on the trip, Independent We Stand put together video interviews with business owners like **Jim Donnelly**. He shared his thoughts with our team about the importance of shopping local.



Chic Lumber Co. O'Fallon, Missouri



Adam Hendrix, president of **Chic Lumber Co.**, has worked with his team to find a variety of ways to connect and give back to their three communities.

For St. Louis natives, Chic Lumber Co. is more than just a business that helps DIYers and pros get the building materials they need for their home or job site. The three-store operation has been serving the greater St. Louis area for more than 30 years and has established itself as an important part of the community.

Adam Hendrix, president of the company, gave us a tour of the company's O'Fallon, Missouri, location. The business features a design center that showcases a complete selection of building materials, from kitchen and bathroom cabinetry to windows, doors, siding and even a finished garage.

According to Hendrix, the business's culture is due in part to his employees.

"My favorite part of operating our business is the family atmosphere we have," Hendrix says. "Among our 61 employees, 23 of them are related to other employees, like fathers and sons or brothers and sisters."

The company is always looking for ways to connect with and give back to the local community, Hendrix says. The operation offers a conference center that is free for any local to use. Not only do they come to the store for their meeting, but they also get to know Chic Lumber employees and the products available, making it positive any way you look at it.

The Chic Lumber Conference Center is a 7,000-square-foot design and conference center that is made available for community use. Not only does it fulfill a need in the community, but it also brings people in who may not have shopped at the business before.

In addition to providing a free conference room, the Chic Lumber Co. team has also been very involved with nonprofit organizations in the area over the years as well, Hendrix says.

"We live here and so do our family and employees, so it's important for us to be a staple in the community," Hendrix says.



When locals visit **Chic Lumber Co.** in O'Fallon, Missouri, they browse a variety of home improvement project ideas, like this decked out finished garage concept.



Kevin Euston, owner of Euston Hardware, has a close relationship with his customers and his employees. According to Euston, his team is an extension of his family.

The hardware industry is where Kevin Euston has spent most of his life. In 1971, his dad Ken opened Euston Hardware, and when Kevin wasn't attending high school he was helping out at the new family business.

"My dad didn't open the store until he was 54 years old, and it was quite a struggle at times," Euston says. "Yet our high level of service has helped us survive. To us, good customer service is attitude. It's born of a stubborn refusal not to compromise. It's friendliness, individual service and attention to detail, and it all comes down to attitude."

After college, Euston helped his dad open a second location and he's been with the business full time ever since. Today, the retail operation has expanded to include four hardware stores in Missouri and Kansas.

One thing Euston has continued from his father is fostering a strong relationship with his employees and loyal customers. Each location hires a range of people, from high school and college-age students to retired professionals. On top of the close bond with his employees, several customers Euston assists are second-generation shoppers.

Euston says he was recently called to the salesfloor to meet with a customer who had a long history with the business.

"Shopping here keeps money in the community. I'm spending money in the community as opposed to it going anywhere else."

—Kevin Euston, Euston Hardware

"He said, 'You probably don't remember me,' and then I told him I did and said his father's name. His jaw dropped and he started crying. He told me his dad, who had died, loved the store and always talked about how much he liked shopping here. It brought tears to his eyes that I remembered his dad. These are experiences we have quite often, and it really makes you feel good."

When asked his thoughts on owning independent home improvement stores, Euston says it's about being different from national chains.

"What sets us apart from the big-box chains is individuality," Euston says. "Our product mix is tailored to what customers are asking for and what they need. Plus, shopping here keeps money in the community. I'm spending money in the community as opposed to it going anywhere else."

Family Center Farm & Home stores offer a wealth of products and services that are uniquely chosen to meet the needs of Kansas City-area residents.

The family business was founded in 1965 and has expanded from one location to six stores throughout Missouri and Kansas. These stores, along with other independent businesses in their respective locations, all help shape the communities they belong in, says owner Bill Mills.

"Locally owned businesses create unique communities because, in my opinion, they are the foundation of the community. Without a good foundation, you don't have a good house," Mills says.

While each of the stores has its own distinct assortments, there are a variety of products that catch customers' eyes, from bags of feed and pet products to power tools, clothing and cowboy boots. The store's team of employees is knowledgeable in all the different categories and can help their customers find exactly what they need.

Employees at all six locations make it a point to enrich the communities the stores are in, which is something all independent businesses should strive to do in some way, Mills says.

"The local businesses are the ones that are in your storefronts, on your main streets. They're the people involved in your town, on your hospital board, your school board and city council," Mills says. "They're involved in your community because they have a passion for it—they have a business there. They filter out into the community in all aspects. That core base brings that dedication to the community where you live."

Family Center Farm & Home shows its dedication to the area by giving back as well, Mills says.

"Our operation sponsors many local events, like fairs and 5K runs," Mills says. "In this particular town, we're very active in the Rotary Club. Whatever happens throughout the year, we're glad to help if we can. In my opinion, if you just sell but you don't participate in your community, that's a slow death. You need to participate and the community recognizes that. It's appreciated, and it's a good overall feeling for everybody." —



Family Center Farm & Home in Paola, Kansas, is much more than a hardware store. The operation devotes a significant amount of salesfloor space to its clothing and cowboy boots, as well as other farm-focused products.