

Get On Board:

APRO's 2009 Board of Directors Candidates



“The board of directors shall be the governing body of the association. The board shall supervise, direct and control the business and affairs of the association, its committees and its publications. The board shall determine the policy of the association...” The purpose and role of the APRO board of directors was established 29 years ago with the adoption of our bylaws, which I’ve excerpted above. Over the long and progressive history of our association, many men and women have stepped up to lead APRO and the industry in establishing rent-to-own as a viable and popular transaction across the country. To them, much is owed. To the ones who follow them, much is expected. APRO’s process of choosing board members has worked and worked well. The time is again at hand for the membership to select its leaders. The 2009 nominees represent the greatest diversity in recent memory. We have candidates from companies both large and small, from public and private ventures and some who are franchisees while others are independents. The following profiles provide insights into those who have put themselves up for nomination. We highlight and welcome the diversity of this slate. Study them well—for you, APRO members, hold the power to direct the future of the association and the industry. —*Bill Keese*

Profiles by Neil Ferguson and Kristen Card



The APRO 2009 board of directors elections will commence on August 31 during the General Session held at APRO's Rent-to-Own Convention and Buying Show at Bally's and the Paris Resort in Las Vegas. For those not attending the event, proxy ballots are available and must be submitted to APRO by August 17. To obtain a proxy ballot, call 800/204-2776.

Dennis Adams

**Full-O-Pep/American Rentals
Bloomington, Indiana**

If ever a company name described one of its employees, Full-O-Pep defines Dennis Adams. Bloomington, Indiana-based Full-O-Pep/American Rentals operates 50 stores and three RNR Custom Wheels and Performance Tires locations across four states and Adams has helped open many of those locations. Currently, as district manager, he oversees 10 key central Indiana stores. "I've never stayed home one sick day," Adams says. "I've never gotten up and said, 'I really dread going in to work today.' Every day, I'm ready to go." That takes a lot of pep.

Now he wants to bring his energy and enthusiasm to the APRO board of directors. "I'm very upbeat about the future [of the industry] and hope to be around for a long time," Adams says. It's likely that he will be around awhile, considering that he's nowhere near retirement age—and appliances, electronics and the other rent-to-own products have been his life's work.

Some 30 years ago, fresh out of high school in Bloomington, Adams started working at a local appliance and electronics store, repairing televisions. Soon after Adams started his job, the store was sold to Jim Hammond, who remains the now-retired owner. Upon buying the business, Hammond, along with his brother-in-law David P. David and Adams, started talking about transforming the company into a then-new-fangled business called rent-to-own—and before long Full-O-Pep/American Rentals was on its way.

David, now the company's vice president and general manager, characterizes Adams as fiercely loyal, brutally honest, extremely hard-working and passionately enthusiastic. "Whenever Dennis likes an idea, he just can't wait to get out and share with other people," David says. "When something needs to be done, Dennis doesn't think twice about getting in there, rolling up his sleeves and taking care of it. For example, every holiday season, he hooks up this long trailer to his truck and hauls products around from store to store to make sure the stores are stocked with what they need to take care of their customers. Den-

nis understands the importance of taking care of things—especially customers, making sure they get what they need when they want it. And he's definitely not afraid to get his hands a little dirty doing it."

David, too, has been taking care of things. He's been on the APRO board of directors for 20 years, which makes him the longest-serving board member in the association's history. But this year he's not running for re-election and will, instead, find other ways to serve the industry. "I have worked with David David for more than 25 years and, now that he's not running [for the board], I thought I would run," Adams says. "I'm running to keep an independent voice on the board. As president of the Indiana Rental Dealers Association, I have worked very closely with Aaron's and Rent-A-Center on Indiana's rent-to-own issues and I've worked with the small mom-and-pop stores on many issues, as well. My objective is to be open-minded about the issues and hear all sides."

Adams—who competed in track, basketball and football all through school and who has shared season tickets to Indiana University basketball games with his dad for more than 30 years—has a competitive streak that keeps him continuously striving for more. "I'm never satisfied," Adams admits. "No matter how successful a store is, in my mind, it's still not where it could be. I love our busy seasons; I enjoy being out in the stores, moving a lot of product, carrying product back and forth between stores and searching for items they need. It's different every season, every day."

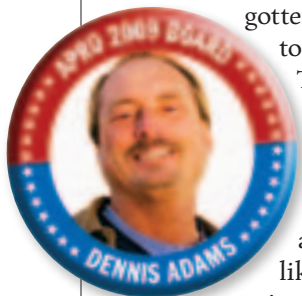
Which is how a rent-to-own career—with more than three decades at the same company—stays fresh for Adams. But beneath the ever-changing daily work landscape, he credits three essential elements with his success and stamina: a solid work ethic, positive attitude and deep caring for his business and its people. "I treat the stores and the company like I'm part of it," Adams says. "When I spend company money, I feel like it's my own money. I feel like the more successful the stores are, the more successful I am. I always treat it like it's my business as much as anybody's business. I feel like part of a family."

Cynthia Baber-Strunk

**Baber's Inc.
Pascagoula, Mississippi**

Cynthia Baber-Strunk knows how to convert a bad circumstance into something better. It's how she got into the rent-to-own business in the first place—and it is why she's inspired to run for a position on the APRO board of directors now.

After teacher high school biology for nine years, in 1986 Baber-Strunk switched careers due to the health



problems of one of her children and began managing jewelry purchasing and distribution for Baber's Inc., a rent-to-own company founded by her father-in-law, James Baber. Her husband, Barry Baber, was the company's executive vice president. Tragically, in 1989 Barry was killed in an airplane accident. "The accident thrust me into a position of having to support my family," Baber-Strunk says. "Thankfully, Barry had taught me a great deal about the business...failure was just not an option."



From there, she did exactly as her late husband had predicted she was capable doing if anything ever happened to him—she developed the Mississippi-based Baber's into the highly successful company it is today, with 51 stores, 260 employees and six RNR Custom Wheels and Performance Tires franchises. Currently, she serves as Baber's chief executive officer. In 1993, Baber-Strunk remarried and her second husband, Shannon Strunk, is Baber's president—not to mention a past member of the APRO board, where, from 2004 to 2006, he served two terms as APRO's president.

Baber-Strunk's transformation into a successful rent-to-own businesswoman was not a solo endeavor. "My late father-in-law [James Baber, founder of Baber's] was truly a wonderful mentor to me," Baber-Strunk emphasizes. "He was a fantastic businessman with great integrity who had a real zest for life. He was very fair, but also firm in his belief that you had to earn your position. And, of course, my late husband taught me a lot. Also, although they're not in the rent-to-own industry, I owe any success I have had to my parents, Ruth and Epp Littlepage, who instilled in me the idea that I could do anything that I set my mind to do if I worked hard."

Now, she'd like to apply that hard-work ethic to service on the APRO board and—as she's done before—help transform negatives into positives. "When I began in rent-to-own, each company was out there doing its own thing. We definitely were not a refined industry," Baber-Strunk says. "Unfortunately, there were a few rough and rowdy dealers who did not treat customers very well—and it hurt our industry for quite a while. We are still paying for some of our industry's history."

But Baber-Strunk sees APRO as one avenue toward bettering what has hindered the industry in the past: "APRO provides education, encourages ethical operations, promotes the image of rent-to-own and offers legal counsel to advise us. It does *many* things, although not all dealers need or use the same services. But the one-store operators and the large public chains have one thing in common—we want to be able to run our business to make a decent profit. APRO

provides us the forum to work together to improve our image and to protect our industry from negative legislation."

"As an APRO board member, I would work to encourage the board and the association's members not to concentrate on our differences, but instead work as a united group to accomplish our common goals," Baber-Strunk says.

Baber-Strunk likes to spend the little free time she has with her four children and two grandchildren. She and Shannon like to travel, too, having set foot on five continents; "We only have two to go," she says. Speaking of travel, she's attended APRO's annual Dave Egan Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., every year for more than a decade.

It's a dedication to rent-to-own that she shares with her husband, the other half of what she considers a really good team: "Shannon and I are a balanced team. We both *love* what we do. He is more a visionary and I am more a realist. He concocts great ideas; I analyze and project. He keeps me from being too conservative and I keep him from being overly aggressive. We are also both strong-willed, independent thinkers. We argue for our point until one wins and one gives—or we both stay steadfast. If neither can be won over, then we know that we need to wait awhile on a decision. It has worked well for us."

While the Cynthia-and-Shannon team excels in business, Baber-Strunk is eager to be a part of APRO's leadership team, too. She wants to bring her experiences—both good and bad—to the table to help the industry. "Rent-to-own dealers are very open with their ideas," she says, "which is very different from the retail operators who seem to be very stingy with their ideas. We love to share what's worked well for us and what has not—and I'm just eager to give back to an industry that's helped me so much."

Chris Bolin **Bolin Rental-Purchase** **Clarksville, Tennessee**



Chris Bolin's journey along the rent-to-own highway has been a long and winding one, with a number of stops along the way. But in 2004, Bolin found a destination for his own business in Clarksville, Tennessee, the town where he was born and raised and now is the home of Bolin Rental-Purchase. Bolin owns a second location in Madisonville, Kentucky.

After serving for seven years as a police officer and later as police sergeant for the Clarksville Police Department, Bolin began in rent-to-own at Alrengo in 1991, followed by a stint in Chicago working for a Michigan-based Col-

orTyme franchisee. After two years there, Alreco's COO Bud Holladay persuaded him to return to Alreco, where Bolin became a multi-store manager based out of Nashville. Bolin was at Alreco when the company went public, merged with Home Choice, which then merged with RentWay. After RentWay, his RTO route also included a stop at Bestway Rent-To-Own and then back to RentWay. But by 2004, Bolin was very eager to strike out on his own.

Figuring that "maybe I should do something for myself," Bolin started his own business back in his hometown. "I knew how to select sites, negotiate leases, set up software, control expenses, buy product and advertise effectively," Bolin says, "so I figured, 'Why not?'" He hasn't looked back since.

Bolin Rental-Purchase has done well and he attributes his success to a single underlying and recurring concept: strong, positive relationships with colleagues, employees and customers. "It's about the people," Bolin says. "Our employees have a terrific attitude and we just love our customers. My employees know that if they don't love our customers, then they can't work here. I make sure my employees treat my customers the way I want to be treated when I'm standing on the other side of the counter."

Just as he demands that his employees take care of his customers, Bolin also sees to it that he takes care of his employees. "One of the things I knew would help me build a great organization was taking care of my employees," Bolin says. "Trying to treat people right and give them a job with perceived value has helped me retain good people who treat our customers really well."

Since going into business for himself, Bolin also has used his considerable people skills to help his industry. Last year, he was a key player in helping reorganize the dormant Kentucky Rental Dealers Association, where he went on to serve as KYRDA's president. Currently, he is president of the Tennessee Rental Dealers Association and a member of both the APRO and TRIB Group board of directors. Last September, at APRO's Rent-to-Own Convention and Buying Show in St. Louis, Bolin received the Rental Dealer of the Year award for his service to the industry.

Rent-to-own fosters a business community that Bolin cherishes. "This industry is so different from so many other industries in that owners and managers and vice presidents will tell you all sorts of information and share it with you freely," he says. "That doesn't happen much in other businesses. Every time I go to an association conference, someone comes up to me and says, 'I didn't know this,' or 'I didn't realize that and I'm really glad to have gotten this information today,' There's a ton of information you've got to have to run your business and it's freely available at these industry events. I think it makes rent-to-own unique and dynamic."

Given his journey in business and his zest for nurturing relationships with his customers and employees, it seems only natural that Bolin also harbors a desire to serve his colleagues. "I decided to run for this board seat because I felt an obligation to give back to the industry and to those dealers who have helped and inspired me to a better life," Bolin says. "I think APRO is a very important component of our industry and it should be active to unite dealers on the common issues that affect us all. Rent-to-own has changed a great deal over the years—mostly for the better—due in part to APRO's efforts to educate, inform and unite dealers. My focus, should I be re-elected, will be to help APRO become more effective and its members more united. Unity is the key to our success."

Bolin and his wife, Zulima, enjoy gardening, traveling, scuba diving, water skiing and motorcycling. For a man who's been a lot of places, both professionally and for leisure, he's happy to be at home and in business in his native Clarksville.

Larry Carrico

Rent One

Mt. Vernon, Illinois

If the image of a light bulb over one's head suggests that an idea is being hatched, then the one over Larry Carrico's head is illuminating 1,000 watts. Carrico loves to nurture ideas for new business ventures, new strategies and new programs—and he and his team turn ideas into realities more often than not. Based in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, Carrico is the owner (along with his wife Sharon) of a 42-store rent-to-own chain, Rent One; a principal of Imagery Marketing Group, a full-service advertising and marketing agency; and owner of two RNR Custom Wheels and Performance Tires franchises. Carrico's companies employ more than 300.

For Carrico and Co., ideas flow continually, especially in the offices of St. Louis-based Imagery Marketing Group. Recently, the firm launched an online employee training program that can be customized for rent-to-own businesses. "Company Cake was a training idea Sharon and my brother [Keith] envisioned," Carrico says. "It was tested in Rent One stores and now is being implemented throughout TRIB Group, among other companies." In fact, Carrico admits, Rent One is often the guinea pig for testing new programs: "Many of the ideas Imagery has created were inspired by Rent One co-workers, tested by them and then Imagery branded them and made them easy to use." During the APRO 2009 Rent-to-Own Convention and Buying Show, August 31–Sep-



tember 2 in Las Vegas, Larry and Keith Carrico will present a seminar highlighting the value of online rent-to-own employee training.

Carrico has carried his reputation for great ideas from the business world to the APRO board room, having served on the board of directors since 2000 and as the association's president from 2006 to 2008. During his tenure as APRO's president, he helped bolster the industry's legislative initiatives: APRO's 2008 Dave Egan Legislative Conference saw the highest attendance in the event's history and, thanks to the powerful grassroots efforts of Carrico and other APRO members like him, the number of co-sponsors of RTO-supported legislation has skyrocketed in the past few years. "Legislative strategies are just hard work," Carrico says. "You need a friendly face, organized efforts and a little luck." [For more on Carrico's legislative savoir faire, see the June-July 2008 issue of RTOHQ: *The Magazine*.]

Having served on APRO's executive committee for two years as president and then this past year as immediate past president, Carrico wants to continue his service to the association by running for re-election to the board. "I'm not sure why this is, but history shows that [upon completion of their terms], many of APRO's past presidents move on to causes other than the board, or they just sit it out for a few years," Carrico says. "I enjoy serving on the board. I enjoy APRO members and the staff and I still receive great satisfaction from participating. I feel appreciated and hope that my contributions have made a difference in the rent-to-own industry." In addition to his leadership roles at APRO, Carrico also serves as treasurer and past president of the Illinois Rental Dealers Association.

Another APRO program that has benefited from Carrico's leadership is the rent-to-own industry's involvement with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. APRO, along with state associations and rent-to-own companies, provide products for the CBCF's annual silent auction, which uses the money raised to award scholarships. Inaugurated earlier in the decade by then-President Gary McDougal, Carrico has brought increased awareness and charitable contributions to the program over the past three years. "The rent-to-own industry's involvement with the Congressional Black Caucus developed with baby steps over the years. In 2009, we used many successful strategies from [Rent One's] Ronald McDonald House Charities program to help the CBC silent auction be more successful," Carrico says. "This year, we published a catalogue of the products up for auction and next year we will produce an online auction site for viewing and bidding." The rent-to-own industry donated more than \$50,000 in products for the CBCF auction and an additional \$20,000 in cash for scholarships. Carrico is quick to credit fellow APRO board

members Tiger John Cleek and Jamie Slatton for their role in the auction's success, designating his own role in the proceedings as that of "organizer and cheerleader."

Carrico is running for another term, "to help enhance the ideas of a great group that continues to keep rent-to-own in the forefront of the marketplace." He's optimistic that the association will help lead the industry toward an ever-brighter future: "APRO will continue to embrace new technologies, test new products, work with Congressional leaders and share ideas." And Carrico intends to keep the light bulb above his head shining brightly. "Almost all ideas we have developed over the years have been inspired by others," Carrico says. "Where I have been successful is defining those ideas and investing in them to make them come alive. I think I bring a level of enthusiasm that helps create success. Many times, an idea may have failed if not for the cheerleading by me and other leaders."

But, Carrico concedes, "Leadership is a two-way street and I have always felt that, with APRO, it has been a great balance of give and take."

John Darden **Premier Rental-Purchase** **Charlottesville, Virginia**

When I got into the rent-to-own business, my son was just born. I had no job and no insurance," John Darden says. "We had no electricity in our house; my wife had to take cold showers. We would drive down the road and collect Coke bottles for the deposit money, just so we could make sure we had enough gas in the car to get her to the hospital." Then Darden spotted an opportunity in Norfolk's *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper. "There was a classified ad for a company called Remco that read: 'Area manager needed'—which was a nice way of saying 'collector and delivery guy'—'six days a week, 60 hours a week, \$660 a month.'"

There was no way Darden could have known that by responding to that ad that he was launching a 33-year roller-coaster ride of a career in rent-to-own. Today, Darden and his son, Christopher, own a Premier Rental-Purchase store in Charlottesville, Virginia. His daughter, Jamison, serves as the company's banker.

Darden has been on the APRO board of directors since 2007 and is eager to fulfill another term. "I decided to run for the APRO board in order to serve our industry," Darden says, "to have the opportunity to communicate to dealers—particularly new dealers—the true meaning of



our industry and share with them my 33 years of experience, both good and bad, in order to help them succeed. I feel that it's my obligation."

The experience to which he refers includes affiliations with several rent-to-own companies. ColorTyme was one such company and it was there that he crossed paths with an energetic up-and-comer named Trooper Earle. After a hiatus from rent-to-own in the 1990s, Darden got back into the industry in 2000, by which time Earle had launched Premier Rental-Purchase. What made Darden choose Premier when he re-entered the RTO world? "What I realized after a few years was that there was a need for the customers to be treated right," Darden says. "That's what we're preaching at Premier; we're really committed to our customers." He sees his re-emergence in the industry as a chance to help those who need it—just as he was once barely scraping to get by. "I see it as God giving me an opportunity to redo some things in my life," Darden says. "Not everybody gets a second chance."

A devout Christian, Darden is extremely active in his church, volunteering his time, energy and money to help the needy in his community, as well as those who are incarcerated. He's also passionate about politics. Darden has managed several campaigns for Charlottesville politicians and has a natural inclination to want to help the rent-to-own industry achieve political success in Washington, D.C.

"The primary goal for APRO should be to lead the charge of making sure that every member of Congress understands the consumer benefits that rent-to-own offers," says Darden, a three-time attendee of APRO's Legislative Conference. "Passage of APRO-backed legislation not only benefits our dealers and their employees, but also the consumer and the communities where our businesses are located. I want to be a part of the board that finally brings federal definition to our industry."

In addition to telling the rent-to-own story on Capitol Hill, Darden also is eager to keep the lines of communication flowing among colleagues in the industry. "As a member of the APRO board, I want to see that every rent-to-own business in America understands the strengths and benefits of belonging to the association," he says, "and I want every rent-to-own organization to receive the positive exposure that they deserve."

Darden, recipient of APRO's 2007 Rental Dealer of the Year Award, feels that the industry's future is bright. "I've been up and down in this business," he says. "I've seen it change significantly—and all for the best. When I first got into rent-to-own, sometimes it was taking a real chance to tell people what line of work I was in; but I was proud to be in the rental-purchase industry, because I understood from day one what we were all about and it's really instilled

a passion in me. It's truly about giving people the opportunity to get things in life they can't get without us.

"I can empathize with customers who are between a rock and a hard place," he says. "When it comes down to paying for a refrigerator or buying medicine for their kids, I want them to buy the medicine; they can pay me next week, or next month. I've been there and I pray I will never lose that sense of understanding. The ability that I've been blessed with and that has helped me be successful is not forgetting where I came from."

Shawn DiLeo
ColorTyme
Lexington, Kentucky



Change happens. That's Shawn DiLeo's credo. Last year, he switched from working for a large rent-to-own company to becoming his own boss and opening three ColorTyme franchises.

Now he's ready for some more change. He'd like to take what he's learned working on the front lines for several state rental dealer associations and apply it to service on APRO's board of directors.

"I want to contribute more at a much larger level," DiLeo says. "I've served as a state president many times, as well as on state boards. [Winning a seat on the board] would give me the opportunity to bring to APRO my experience in corporate rent-to-own *and* as a new business owner of three ColorTyme franchise stores.

"APRO has done a fantastic job in fighting for our rights to do business," DiLeo continues. "I have watched this for many years on the sidelines and now it's time for me to step up and help do the same for others who are just starting out in our industry. The business has been great to me, my family and all my friends who are in the industry. I can be a valuable asset to the board with my passion for the business."

DiLeo's passion for rent-to-own has been reinvigorated by his recent turn to ownership. "One of the consistent things about corporate America is change. I got used to change; I welcomed it, because it brought new ideas and opportunities with it." One of his favorite things about rent-to-own—the industry he's been working in for the past 21 years—is the constant challenges it presents, day in and day out. From the day in 1988 that he responded to a newspaper ad for a Rent-A-Vision delivery driver in upstate New York to the day in September 2008 when he opened up his first ColorTyme in Lexington, Kentucky, DiLeo has followed a professional path intended to keep it fresh.

Before taking the entrepreneurial leap last year, DiLeo was successful working for some rent-to-own titans. He rose

through the Rent-A-Vision ranks quickly, then was recruited by Rent-A-Center, where he stayed for 14 years, eventually overseeing more than 60 stores. He left Rent-A-Center to become the chief operations officer for a four-store franchise of Aaron Rents. Along the way, DiLeo gained some invaluable administrative expertise, but eventually felt the urge to be in business for himself.

“There’s a point at which no one is going to be able to teach you anything really new about the business,” DiLeo says. “They can show you different ways to look at it, but they’re not going to teach you anything really different. And I realized there are two types of people in this life: leaders and followers. You can always play it safe and be a follower, or you can be a leader and get out there and do something on your own.”

Searching for something different led DiLeo back to something familiar; he opted to launch his new business under Rent-A-Center’s franchise arm, ColorTyme [www.colortyme.com]. “The market conditions were right on, I was maxed out and I just needed to do this for myself and my family,” DiLeo explains.

All the while that he’s been working for others and then in business for himself, DiLeo has been exceptionally active in industry trade groups. He’s led the recent reorganizations of both the Oregon and West Virginia state rental dealers associations and has served as a state association president five times.

In addition to being an enthusiastic supporter of state-based initiatives, DiLeo’s also a big believer in APRO. “I think I can bring energy [to the board] as a former corporate employee and now as a business owner,” he says. “I would like to help state associations be more active; it’s hard when there is just a small group people—I’ve been there!” He also wants to help the board achieve the following goals: “Number one is get federal legislation! Also, support the officers of the board in their respected positions—they’ve done an awesome job; continue to improve the rent-to-own image with more positive stories and events; and work on recruitment of new APRO members. We need to keep charging ahead and stay united in the process.”

While enjoying the demands of owning a business and helping the rent-to-own industry, DiLeo also enjoys the flexibility that being his own boss provides. He’s able to spend more personal time with his three children and wife, Dawn, and with a few of his favorite pastimes: boating, bow-hunting and University of Kentucky basketball. The change definitely suits him. “I can do things I wasn’t able to do before—make decisions and better empower myself and my people to do what’s right for the business, the employees and the customers. Now, if I want to help somebody out, I can,” DiLeo says.

Dave Edwards

SEI/Aaron’s

East Hartford, Connecticut

Like many in the rent-to-own industry, Dave Edwards considers himself a people person. “When I was young, I knew I would be in a job where I dealt with people,” Edwards says. As president and chief operating officer for SEI/Aaron’s, he’s certainly in the “people” zone now. “The rent-to-own industry is different because of the ongoing relationship...between the associate and customer,” Edwards says. “It is almost an old-fashioned neighborhood business where our associates know, and get involved in, their customers’ lives. At a traditional retailer, like Best Buy, a customer buys from the brand. In our industry, the customer buys from the person.”

Along with connecting to customers, Edwards shares an enthusiasm for relating to industry colleagues as well; currently, he serves on the APRO board of directors and is chairman of APRO’s state association committee. “I have developed into the person I am in the time I’ve spent in this industry,” he says. “I am fortunate to be where I am and I want to give back to an industry that has given me so much. My motivation is to serve to the best of my ability.”

Edwards was born and raised in Deerfield, Illinois, then lived in Providence, Rhode Island, from age 12 to 18. Now he calls Longmeadow, Massachusetts, home, where he lives with his wife, Samantha, and eight-year-old daughter, Ashley Elizabeth. He has been in rent-to-own since 1991; prior to that, he sold cable television door-to-door, worked as a telemarketer for a newspaper, did some heavy lifting for his father’s trucking company and sold copiers for Lanier Worldwide. He deems the bulk of his pre-RTO experience as “great sales training. I’ve always liked sales and I’ve always liked management.”

Nineteen years ago, he went to work for Thorn International Rentals, later to become Rent-A-Center. He considers one of his first managers in the industry, ColorTyme franchisee (and fellow APRO member) Scott Brown, an early mentor. “He’s still a good friend and a sounding board,” Edwards says. As part of the Aaron’s family, he names SEI/Aaron’s CEO Charles Smithgall III as his current mentor and Aaron’s founder Charlie Loudermilk a role model. “I’ve tried to learn something from just about everyone I’ve worked with in the industry.”

Edwards is very proud of the culture that Loudermilk, Smithgall, he and others have created at Aaron’s. “Everyone at SEI/Aaron’s shares our values,” he says. “If you don’t, you’re not on the team. The Aaron’s system is the best in



the industry. We are constantly training our associates and reaffirming our values and culture. I've worked hard to recognize talent and create teams with positive synergy. I like to believe I'm down to earth and can relate to almost anyone." SEI/Aaron's currently operates 72 stores and employs more than 600.

In addition to his service on the APRO board, Edwards also finds time to put his people skills to work for the New York State Rental Dealers Association, where he has served as that association's president for the past two years—rocky years indeed for rent-to-own in the Empire State. New York is home to one of the RTO's key opponents, Senator Charles Schumer, and the state's rent-to-own businesses have been threatened repeatedly by legislative initiatives in both Albany and Washington, D.C., over the past few years. Edwards has played one of the key roles in developing strategies to stem the onslaught of anti-RTO perceptions and legislative initiatives. As part of the plan, he has helped initiate seven new state rental dealer associations in the past year.

An avid reader and history buff, Edwards shares with other rental dealers the concerns about the industry's image in the past, but also is optimistic that rent-to-own is heading in the right direction. "The standards in the industry are *much* more consistent now than in the 1990s," he says. "It is extremely rare to walk into a store and think, 'This is a disgrace—I can't believe I'm in this industry.' As the perception develops that rent-to-own is more legitimate, it will attract more people to the industry. We need to stay cohesive and viable. Our primary goals should be to have protective federal legislation passed and continue to put a positive face on rent-to-own."

Edwards considers communication a primary element in countering the attacks and helping the industry develop. He views APRO as the primary means of keeping all rental dealers heading in the same direction. "APRO is important as the voice of rent-to-own and the kind of glue that binds dealers together," Edwards observes. "The association acts as a catalyst for competitors with different business models to discuss and share common issues. I want to continue to be a part of that and I want to contribute to the health of the rent-to-own industry."

William McCrae

**Buzz's Lease Purchase and Sales
San Antonio, Texas**

Being in the rent-to-own industry since 1981 necessitates an ability to go with the flow and it's a character trait William McCrae is proud to possess. Over the past 25 years, McCrae has seen dramatic shifts in rent-to-own and its governance and now he would like to be part of

that leadership as a member of the APRO board of directors. "I have mastered adapting to change in the business environment," McCrae says, "and I have personal self-discipline as well as the willingness to share success with others."

McCrae is president and one of the owners of Buzz's Lease Purchase and Sales headquartered in San Antonio, Texas. He was born in Bethesda, Maryland, but has lived most of his life in Texas. And in true Texas style, he runs a small business that thinks big. "We are a small company that uses the business processes of a large company," McCrae says. "We developed a business model that, when executed as planned, can compete in most, if not all, markets." Buzz's business is eight stores strong and employs 48.

Prior to delving into rent-to-own—practically at its inception—he was in the U.S. Navy for four years. But soon the entrepreneurial bug bit and McCrae sought a life in business. "As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a leader and be in business for myself," he says. McCrae's first rent-to-own experience was working for a large franchisee and later as an independent dealer. Then, in 2001, he and his current business partners launched Buzz's. "Having worked for a franchisee for seven years and being independent for the past 13, I believe I can relate to *all* members' range of concerns and issues."

In addition to operating Buzz's, McCrae has owned an audiology and hearing-aid dispensing business, Beltone Audiology and Hearing Aids, since 1989. McCrae's daughter, Raquel, who graduated recently from Texas Christian University, heads up business development and marketing for the company, which operates six clinics in San Antonio and Austin, Texas. Her addition to the company makes Raquel a fourth-generation McCrae in the audiology/hearing-aid business. "My primary role in both businesses is to lead in the strategic planning, annual business planning and budget processes," McCrae says.

Currently, McCrae is vice president of the Texas Association of Rental Agencies and recently was slated to be TARA's president, a post he'll assume in October. He also serves on APRO's ethics committee. While he observes that "every trade needs an active, vibrant and professional trade association that acts in the best interests of all its members and associate members," McCrae has helped APRO go above and beyond association basics. In August 2005, the day after Hurricane Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast, he urged APRO to initiate conference calls that led to the formation of the association's disaster relief effort. "When Hurricane Katrina hit, we lost stores in New Orleans," McCrae says. "APRO coordinated conference calls for all affected members to share information and



we were provided helpful resources such as bankers and insurance companies that helped create a recovery plan.”

McCrae cites APRO’s networking as another key benefit to rental dealers. “The continuous networking opportunities and professional relationships have helped me operate a better, more profitable rent-to-own business,” he says. “The resources made available through being a member allow smaller companies to have access to knowledge and information that larger companies take for granted.”

McCrae wants to nurture APRO’s benefits as part of the board and hopes to help raise the bar on the industry’s image. “I would continue to challenge our membership to raise the overall professionalism and, by doing so, enhance our image to the public.” Also, he shares another industry objective with many other APRO members: “We need to see to it that legislation is passed that provides a level of protection and certainty to our members so they can operate competitively and profitably.”

McCrae has been married for 25 years. He and his wife, Francine, have two daughters, the aforementioned Raquel, 21, and Taylor, 19, a junior at the University of Mississippi. He’s the former mayor pro-tem of Kerrville, Texas, having served four years on Kerrville’s City Council.

While he’s seen a transformation of the industry over the past 28 years—“The quality of leadership, more professionalism at every level and the size of the stores are a few things that quickly come to mind”—he knows that the one constant in RTO is change. “I believe that the rent-to-own industry is here to stay,” McCrae says, “but I believe that it will change to meet private and public expectations.”

Paul Sternberg **Choice Corporate Housing** **Houston, Texas**

As reported in the previous issue of RTOHQ: *The Magazine*, the rent-to-own industry continues to broaden its customer base by attracting more corporate and military housing clients. It’s a good fit, but it’s a market rent-to-own dealers haven’t tapped into as much as they could, according to Paul Sternberg, a lawyer and owner of Choice Corporate Housing based in Houston, Texas. Last year, Sternberg joined APRO in part to network with rent-to-own dealers and make them aware of the opportunities for new business within the corporate housing industry. Now he’s running for the APRO board of directors.

“It’s time for APRO to elect someone outside the box and I am that person,” Sternberg says. “With a law degree and an entrepreneurial spirit, I’ll bring different viewpoints and ideas to the board.” Although somewhat “outside the box” of the typical rent-to-own dealer, Sternberg

does operate part of the Choice Corporate Housing as a rent-to-rent business. “Our company uses rent-to-rent companies [for temporary housing clients]—but, we also purchase our own products for our corporate units, making us, in essence, a rental company. This gives me a unique perspective because I’m a *client* of rent-to-rent and also the owner of a rent-to-rent business.

“Ours is one of only a handful of corporate housing companies that own our furniture and housewares,” he says. “Most corporate housing companies rent from the major suppliers, but primarily we are a rental company.”

Sternberg has become increasingly interested in the ties between corporate housing and the rent-to-own and rent-to-rent businesses. “The challenges that our businesses face are very similar. There is a lot of synergy [between our businesses] that needs to be exploited. It’s a good time to be in this industry. In the current economy, we should be thriving, yet we meet people who have not been exposed to our business. It is important that such potential new customers have a positive impression of rent-to-own and rent-to-rent.”

Sternberg is a born entrepreneur. “My family inspired me [to go into business]. Our family has a 200-year retail tradition,” he says. Born and raised in New Orleans, Sternberg worked in a Foley’s Department Store for a decade before entering law school. While studying law, he supported himself working for a travel agency and in real estate. With a law degree in hand and the entrepreneurial bent still in tow, Sternberg landed in the corporate housing industry four years ago; Choice Corporate Housing now employs 14. As his business developed, Sternberg saw the advantages of purchasing the furniture, appliances and electronics to rent along with the corporate units.

It’s this unconventional route into the rental business that Sternberg says would make him a unique asset to the APRO board. “It is time for the industry to expand to other avenues of business, including home staging and corporate housing. As a corporate housing owner, I am best able to bridge that gap and help rent-to-own dealers broaden their markets,” Sternberg says. “I can provide legal and business assistance to APRO members and I feel that my knowledge will bring a new dimension to the board.”

If elected to the board, Sternberg says he’ll help the association with its legislative strategy. “It is important to provide a unified strategy to the public and to legislators. We need for potential customers—as well as members of Congress—to understand that we provide a service that is needed and important to the communities we serve. If rent-to-rent and rent-to-own are not around, other less desirable alternatives will surface.” ✧

