

## IN SEARCH OF THE INDUSTRY'S

# Pinnacle

**H**elp APRO and the rent-to-own industry honor the two most important people in the rent-to-own business: the customer and the employee. How, you ask? By finding and nominating the 2008 Rent-to-Own Customer of the Year and Employee of the Year. 🌟 APRO's RTO Customer of the Year and Employee of the Year contest marks its ninth anniversary this year—almost a decade of recognizing those who best serve not only our industry, but their communities and the betterment of society in general. If you know a customer or an employee in the rent-to-own industry who excels in charity and kindness, then please help us honor them. 🌟 APRO's Rent-to-Own Customer of the Year and Employee of the Year competition helps increase store morale and motivate RTO employees. It also helps bolster the image of the industry and has proven to be one of the best means of attaining positive local news coverage for rent-to-own businesses. Many companies have created their own internal contest then nominated their winners for APRO's national competition.

**APRO's annual Rent-to-Own Customer of the Year and Employee of the Year awards shed light on what makes this industry great. We're asking for your help in finding this year's recipients—and if your nominee is selected, we'll even pay you for your efforts!**

**BY RICHARD MAY**

## What's in it for me?

The 2008 Employee of the Year will win a trip for two—with accommodations, travel and convention registration included—to APRO's Convention and Buying Show in St. Louis, August 11–14. The winning employee will be honored during APRO's general session as well as in APRO's publications and on its Web site. APRO's 2008 Customer of the Year will likewise win a trip for two to APRO's 2008 Convention and Buying Show—or the cash equivalent. And for helping APRO find that distinguished Customer of the Year, the store that nominates this year's winner will receive \$500.

The competition not only benefits rent-to-own employees, customers, the industry and its image, but gives you a chance to win a free vacation or money. So what have you got to lose? Read the profiles of past winners (see sidebar) to get a better idea of the caliber of people APRO is striving to honor. Then visit APRO's Web site ([www.rtohq.org](http://www.rtohq.org)) and complete the nomination form or use the form included in this article and send it to APRO.



Rent-to-Own Employee of the Year recipients at APRO's 2007 Convention and Buying Show: Murray Head (2006), Jody Katz (2004), Paul Russell (2005) and Jonathan Brown (2007).

See nomination form and requirements on page 44.

## PROFILES IN

# excellence

Here are brief profiles of APRO's previous Rent-to-Own Customer of the Year and Employee of the Year recipients since the program was initiated in 2000. If, while reading about these winners, you realize that you know an employee and/or customer who has likewise gone "above and beyond" the call of duty, please make the effort to nominate them for the 2008 competition (see entry form on page 44; or visit [www.rtohq.org](http://www.rtohq.org) to submit nominations electronically). *Note:* these profiles were written at the time the honors were bestowed and may not accurately depict current circumstances or employment.

### RTO Customer of the Year \*

#### 2005: Johnnie Bradford

Johnnie Bradford is pastor of Open Door Full Gospel in Columbus, Mississippi, which she founded in 1990 to provide not only a place to worship, but also to give children a sense of belonging. Bradford's church serves 300 members and includes a youth center for children with no place to go and nobody to love and care for them. Not only does she have a special place in her heart for children, she's also opened a personal-care home for the elderly. Bradford is a certified nurse assistant and certified in caring for the hard-of-hearing.



#### 2004: Patrick and Marianna Head

Patrick Head has served as pastor of the Friendship C.M.E. Church in Dorsey, Mississippi, for the past 10 years where he and his wife, Marianna, help the community fight poverty, homelessness and hunger. Longtime Baber's Leasing customers, the Heads assist in tutorial and mentoring programs for children and Patrick is the co-founder of the Save Our Youth organization.



#### 2003: Donna Brown

Minister and evangelist Donna Brown was raised by an alcoholic mother who was unable to hold down a job and, eventually, a home. "I had to overcome a lot of anger from my childhood," she says. "Just because you're a minister doesn't mean you have it all together. We all have to overcome things." Brown is a regular visitor to nursing homes to cheer up the elderly. She has spent a great deal of time counseling a young mother struggling with drug addiction and has taken on the responsibility of helping to raise the woman's child.



#### 2002: Norma Burgenger

Norma Burgenger of Vinita, Oklahoma, has turned to Stanley's Rent To Own to assist her in opening her home to strangers in need. "Even though she lives on a fixed income, she takes in people who need a temporary place to stay regardless of their background or current situation," says Stanley's Rent To Own store manager Bobby Pierce. "Norma is a very caring person who does whatever it takes to help someone out. Without us, however, she might not be able to assist these folks in the manner she would like to."



#### 2001: James and Brenda Atchison

James and Brenda Atchison have been loyal customers of the Rent One store in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, since its opening in 1985. The Atchisons have helped raise eight foster children as well as four children of their own. "They never know when the local child protective services

\*The RTO Customer of the Year was not awarded in 2006 and 2007.

office might call to ask them to rescue another child,” says Rent One’s Keith Carrico. “However, when the call comes, they know Rent One will be there to deliver whatever is needed to make their house a home for a child in need.”

#### **2000: Maria Magdalena Estrada**

El Paso’s Fiesta Rent To Own customer Maria Estrada is a single mother of four boys who has relied on the service and convenience of her local store for many years. “I have acquired home furnishings, appliances and electronics to create a warm and stable environment for all of my boys,” says Estrada.



#### **RTO Employee of the Year**

#### **2007: Jonathan Brown**

Jonathan Brown’s participation in the Upward Bound program and his role in supporting his grandparents as they raised him and his siblings distinguishes him as an individual who goes above and beyond his job to help his community and family. Brown mentors other students and contributes to such causes as Adopt-A-Highway, the Red Cross, blood and food donation campaigns and local nursing homes. He has continued his leadership and mentoring through his employment at Best-Way/Rent To Own in Tappahannock, Virginia. In his first year of employment, Brown was named the company’s Employee of the Year before going on to become APRO’s Rent-to-Own Employee of the Year.



#### **2006: Murray Beck**

Murray Beck, vice president of Rent One operations in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, is a champion at raising money and awareness for muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis. His efforts not only raise awareness and funds for these important causes, they also serve to showcase Rent One’s commitment to community involvement. In addition to being named APRO’s 2006 Rent-to-



Own Employee of the Year, Beck was also honored as Rent One’s Regional Manager of the Year in 2006.

#### **2005: Paul Russell**

During the 2004 flooding in the Ohio Valley, Paul Russell of Blue Ribbon Rentals led a team to solicit and deliver food and clothes for victims of the disaster. A pastor for his church, Russell started a youth ministry from scratch and now ministers to at least 60 teenagers—mostly from broken homes and/or abusive backgrounds. Russell doesn’t believe in the word, “can’t.” He has taken care of employees in need and fed hungry customers who’ve lost their jobs.



#### **2004: Jody Katz**

Jody Katz of Buddy’s Home Furnishings in Tampa, Florida, strives to raise awareness of the problem of missing children. His efforts and Buddy’s role in supporting Child Protection Education of America raised \$10,000 for the organization by acting as a corporate sponsor for CPEA’s annual “Leather & Denim Biker Ball” and sponsoring the annual “Missing Children’s Walk” in Florida. In addition, Katz and Buddy’s have sponsored at least 15 “ID Me Now” events where parents can have their children’s fingerprints registered in each of Buddy’s stores throughout Florida.



#### **2003: Anthony Robinson**

Rent-A-Center employee Anthony Robinson of Lakewood, Colorado, is a single parent who not only has two children of his own, but also adopted his sister’s three daughters after their mother died in 2001. Robinson participates in Street Beat, a program for at-risk and troubled youth in Denver, Colorado. “I went there after high school and became a member and then an instructor,” says Robinson. “My focus is the kids, because they need some-



body. That’s my drive to keep going. I don’t have that ‘quit’ in my system.”

#### **2002: Ronnie D. Williams**

In addition to his duties as account manager for RentWay in Harrisburg, Illinois, Ronnie D. Williams manages the Harvest Deliverance Center, a homeless shelter that also provides food and clothing for the needy. A father of six, Williams spends the holidays preparing and serving meals to those unfortunate enough to find themselves without a home or family with whom to spend the holidays.

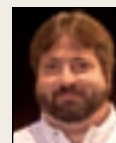
#### **2001: Josef Warren**

Josef Warren is manager of the New Image Rent To Own store in Security, Colorado, and “really knows how to make our customers feel right at home,” says New Image Assistant Manager Mike Payne. “He’s great with people—both customers and employees—and treats everyone with equal respect.” Beyond his outstanding efforts at New Image, Warren also gives of himself outside of work. He makes frequent visits to cancer patients, holds prayer groups for the depressed and also visits with prison inmates.



#### **2000: Eric Ison**

Eric Ison, store manager for Showplace in Marion, Ohio, was nominated for APRO’s Rent-to-Own Employee of the Year award by his district manager for being a “valued high-performance manager.” Ison not only has become one of the company’s leading trainers—including developing a computer training class for employees—but also is involved in his community. He started a food drive, helped build a school playground and participates in United Way fund-raisers as well as the Adopt-A-Family program, the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross.





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