




**Leadership is a
two-way street,
loyalty up and
loyalty down.
Respect for one's
superiors; care for
one's crew.**

Grace Murray Hopper

The Dedicated



Customer loyalty is one of the key elements for success in the rent-to-own business. You know you're doing your job correctly when you experience that loyalty in your stores. Holding on to valuable employees is equally gratifying and it's also a challenge. Employee turnover is an unfortunate corollary of modern business. But occasionally we do encounter rent-to-own employees who have bucked the trend by dedicating themselves to our industry over the long haul.

Recently, APRO has profiled those who go the extra mile for rent-to-own on Capitol Hill ("The Connectors") and the heads of RTO's public companies, Aaron Rents and Rent-A-Center ("The Titans"). In this issue of *RTOHQ: The Magazine*, we salute "The Dedicated," longtime rent-to-own employees who have been in the trenches—on the floor, in the store—and maintain a zeal for working in our industry. They might not be running their own companies, but they're responsible for helping make their companies run.

Dennis Adams, Angelo Gughicello and Craig Shewmake each exemplify the model employee, helping nurture the growth of the companies for whom they work—Full-O-Pep Appliances, Partners Sales and Leasing, and Briley Investments/Aaron's, respectively. Their longevity in rent-to-own is an inspiration in a business climate that typically sees employees come and go in rapid succession. If turnover is an accepted part of the business, then these guys are exceptions—and exceptional. —Neil Ferguson





Craig Shewmake

BRILEY INVESTMENTS/AARON'S, ABILENE, TEXAS

This CFO counts on striking a balance between the predictability of his numbers and his boss' flair for the unexpected

By Kristen Card

For someone who almost proudly purports to be “boring,” Craig Shewmake, vice president and controller for Abilene, Texas-based Briley Investments, dba Aaron's, has a perspective on his career in the rent-to-own industry that's really rather interesting: with 25 years of rent-to-own under his professional belt, Shewmake still doesn't consider himself an RTO guy.

“I'm the guy who deals with all the numbers, so what I'm doing isn't industry-specific,” Shewmake explains. “I think my favorite thing is working for Robert, and he happens to work in rent-to-own. If he were running Dairy Queens or something, then I'd probably still be working for him. Whatever Robert decides to do, I'm going to be there with him.”

“Robert” is company owner Robert Briley. The two have worked together for almost 30 years, having originally met at Western Marketing, a local petroleum distributor for Conoco products. Briley left that business to run his own Curtis Mathes franchise and, a couple of years later, hired Shewmake to handle the company's accounting. Among their commonalities, the pair share West Texas roots, a self-deprecating sense of humor and strong mutual esteem.

“Intellectually, I'm not that bright,” Briley laughs. “I'm a big-picture kind of guy. I was never interested in learning—I was interested in figuring out what the requirements were for me to make money. Craig's always interested in gaining knowledge and he retains everything.”

It's that love of learning that helps Shewmake stay satisfied professionally. A champion of innovation and creativity, he's ever-

seeking—and self-teaching—new technologies to help make his work more efficient; often he can be found lunching with the company's IT staff, talking over the latest firewall software or e-gadget. Briley's “big-picture” ideas keep Shewmake on his toes, too.

“Robert keeps it fresh for me to some extent,” Shewmake says. “He's always changing and growing, so we're not stagnant. There's always something new—we're buying or selling stores, he's exploring a new opportunity or new areas of business to get into. Whenever he returns from a meeting, he'll have 15 or 20 ideas he's all excited about to drop in my lap. He calls me the devil's advocate, because I consistently take a more pragmatic and pessimistic view of everything.”

“I'm overly optimistic and aggressive,” Briley concedes. “Craig will be the first one to tell me ‘no, you shouldn't do that’ or ‘you should do this.’ Whatever he says, I believe it. He's a total reality check.”

Briley says he frequently calls upon his friend and colleague for much more than just Shewmake's “financial oversight” job description.

“Craig enjoys doing for others,” Briley says. “He's a good listener, extremely thoughtful and conscientious. He can be anything he wants to be—he could be the operations manager, he's strong at advertising, he's a great trainer, he's incredibly organized and thorough. He's got it all. He simply prefers to do the accounting part of the business.”

“I used to be in marketing and management and I like the accounting side better because the numbers are always there when you want them, they don't talk back, they don't

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Anthony, Katie,
Angelo and Michael
Gughiocello



THE DEDICATED

Angelo Gughiocello

PARTNERS SALES AND LEASING, TEXAS CITY, TEXAS

**Whether it's
with his kids,
customers or
colleagues, Angelo
Gughiocello
consistently puts
his "families" first**

By Kristen Card

When Angelo Gughiocello finally arrived in Texas City, Texas, it had been a long, strange road trip from his home in New York state—a two-day journey in an \$800 van (that lost a wheel in Mississippi), with his three kids, about 15 boxes of his life belongings and a store manager job waiting for him with John Spangle at Partners Rental (www.partnersrental.com).

"The kids had essentially been raised in the rent-to-own stores Angelo had worked in," Spangle remembers. "So the first day, his middle son, Michael, who was 10 at the time, comes walking into the store and doesn't say a word. He walks all the way around the store—it's about 8,500 square feet—comes over to me, looks me straight in the eye and says, 'I'm Mike.' I shake his hand and say, 'Hi, Mike. It's good to meet you,' and he says, 'I'll have this all cleaned up in a week.' That's the work ethic Angelo's got and he has definitely instilled it in his kids."

The moment classically characterizes the interweaving of Gughiocello's personal and professional lives into the extended familial structure that it is today. And by all accounts, this big family is also a happy one. Gughiocello has been with the company—now named Partners Sales and Leasing—for almost six years, where he's now operations manager overseeing six Texas locations—three in Texas' coastal region and three in the Austin area.

"He's everybody's best friend," Spangle says. "The customers just love him. Angelo's as honest and fair as the day is long, he just walks and talks integrity. And his greatest strength is collections; he knows how to talk

to people, how to be respectful and be firm, so he can say, 'Look, it's time. You need to come in to pay me.' To be a good collector, you have to have good relationships. That's what Angelo's all about."

Gughiocello's relationship with Spangle actually originated in 1996, when Renter's Choice—where Gughiocello had been working since 1989—acquired Magic Rent-to-Own—where Spangle had been working since 1990. Spangle, a company vice president, promoted Gughiocello from store manager in the small city of Hornell, New York, to a regional manager way down in Louisiana. Gughiocello amped up the area's profit from 2–3 percent to 13–14 percent within six months. But when he was confronted by his homesick spouse, Gughiocello requested a demotion so he could return with his family to New York. He and his wife eventually separated, but with full-time custody of his children, Gughiocello continued to turn down promotions and a few earlier proposals from Spangle to avoid excessive hours at the office. He accepted the Partners offer in large part because of Spangle's clear understanding and support of his single-dad status.

"John was always 'family first,'" says Gughiocello. "When I came to take over the Texas City store, we set up a playroom on the second floor for the kids to be after school and on weekends, so they had somewhere to do homework, watch TV, play video games or whatever. I've learned a lot about family values working with John."

Long hours are no longer a concern, but are now commonplace for Gughiocello, who's biggest challenge at work, according to Spangle, is going home.

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FOOTBALL

THE ROCK
FOOTBALL



THE DEDICATED

Dennis Adams

FULL-O-PEP APPLIANCES, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

After more than 30 years in the business, Dennis Adams still stands ready, willing and able to do whatever it takes to take care of business

By Kristen Card

I've never stayed home one sick day. I've never gotten up and said, 'I really dread going in to work today.' Every day, I'm ready to go." Full-O-Pep/American Rental (www.americanrentals.com) District Manager Dennis Adams likes his job. Which is a good thing, as it's been more than 30 years since the Bloomington, Indiana, native started working—straight out of high school—in a local appliance store, repairing televisions. Within a few years, the store was sold to Jim Hammond, who remains the now-retired owner. Within a few more months, Hammond, Hammond's brother-in-law David P. David and Adams were talking about transforming the company into a then-new-fangled business called rent-to-own.

"Jim bought an informational packet about the rental business from Bud Green up in Michigan," Adams remembers. "For \$100, you got a packet with an outline of the business and all the forms you would need to run it. And part of the deal was you could go up to visit his operation to see what he was doing and how it worked."

The three men did, indeed, take a field trip up to Kalamazoo Rentals to spend the day with owner Green—who must have been persuasive, because the trio decided en route home that they were going to try the rental business. Adams managed the company's first rental department.

Today, Full-O-Pep/American Rental has a flourishing 50 stores and three RNR Custom Wheels & Performance Tires locations across four states. Adams has helped open many of those locations and he oversees 10 key central Indiana stores. David, now 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 product around from store to store to make sure the stores are stocked with what they need to take care of their customers. Dennis 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."

"Our customers want what everybody else wants," Adams says. "But they just don't have the ability to get it. We create that for them. We've got customers today who are third-generation—it was the parents, then their kids and now their grandkids coming into our store, and that's so satisfying."

At the same time, 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 continuously keeps him 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."

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The Gerwes FROM PAGE 38

they've developed with their customers and by being there, we're building the same sort of working relationship with them."



The Gerwes' approach to their own business mirrors those close connections. Originally launched by Mike Sr., and his wife, Joyce (they'll celebrate their golden anniversary next summer), RES now employs a tight-knit, cross-trained "family" of 15, led by what Mike

Jr. calls "an extraordinary management team." Mike Sr., sidling toward retirement, today holds the official title of company chairman. His son honors the important role his father still plays within the business by calling him "Guide."

"I've had no problem whatsoever in letting go of responsibility and transferring it to [Mike Jr.] from day one," Mike Sr. says, "because we've always been so in-sync in how we think, work and deal with the challenges we face daily. We've already concluded a succession plan—and it isn't an end, it's a new beginning. We've successfully gotten here without missing a beat and we intend to be around a long, long time." ✧

Kristen Card is a freelance business writer based in Austin, Texas.



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Shewmake FROM PAGE 23

walk off the job, and you can always count on them," Shewmake only half-jokes.



All joking aside, the disciplined, detail-oriented Shewmake revels in the methodical nature of his number-crunching—and marvels at his good fortune in finding the ideal combination for a successful career—in rent-to-own, or anywhere.

"You've got to find work you like to do and people you like working with," quips Shewmake. "And if you can find a company that will let you grow and develop into your full potential, then that's the best." ✧

Gughiocello FROM PAGE 25

"I literally have to forbid him to work seven days a week," Spangle says. "He's not ignoring his kids—they're with him.



It's just what he loves to do. The people coming in and out of the store, they're his family. So if I tell him he can't go to work, then I'm telling him he can't go to family."

Though Spangle frets about burnout, Gughiocello—going into his 20th year in rent-to-own—says Spangle himself has been vital to his friend's staying power.

"Keeping it fresh has a lot to do with who you work for," Gughiocello explains. "I think burnout comes not from just being somewhere, but from not enjoying your job and who you work for. I really enjoy dealing with people, and John and I work well together. I really owe my success to my family—my kids first and foremost: Anthony, Michael and Katie—as well as my family in rent-to-own." ✧

Adams FROM PAGE 27

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 rent-to-own success and stamina: a solid work ethic, a positive attitude and a 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." ✧