



# GE Consumer and Industrial

PAUL EICHBERGER AND PAULA ALLISON

**General Electric has been a part of the rent-to-own world from the start—and its two RTO reps have been with the Louisville-based company almost as long.**

**By Neil Ferguson**

General Electric's appliances have kept food frozen, cold, warm, hot and boiling for more than a century. They've helped households wash and dry clothes and dishes for generations and, since rent-to-own's inception, GE products have been on RTO delivery trucks. GE has been an APRO associate member since the association was founded in 1980. In short, the company is no "Johnny come lately"—nor are two of its key rent-to-own representatives, Paul and Paula. Paul Eichberger started at GE in 1988 and has worked for the rental sales division in Louisville, Kentucky, for the past 15 years. Paula Allison celebrates her 26th anniversary with the company this month and has worked with Paul to accommodate the rent-to-own industry for well over a decade.

"Because Paula and I have worked for so long in rent-to-own, we know many of the rental dealers on a personal as well as business basis," Paul says. "Even many dealers who do not currently buy GE products." It's the kind of vendor/dealer relationship that is nurtured over time, yet these two GE reps initially didn't visualize such enduring careers with the hometown business giant and its rent-to-own division. When Paula was first prompted by her manager to consider working with GE's rent-to-own customers, she almost declined because she didn't know much at all about the RTO industry and wasn't sure she wanted to switch gears to the rental niche. "But now I'm so glad I didn't decline the offer," Paula says. "I'm very fond of this group of customers—I'm growing old with them!"

Paul and Paula are among the thousands who toil at Appliance Park in Louisville, home to GE's Consumer and Industrial headquar-

ters. Paul likes to point out that—as Louisville natives—both Paula and he are in the minority among those in sales and marketing at GE; most began life somewhere else. For Paul and Paula, roots and stability have been the thread of life. Paula lives in a home a mere three blocks from the one in which she was raised and now, along with her husband Mike, she is raising two girls, Kaelin, 18, and Sydney, 14. Paula's parents live next door. Paul has a son, Michael (age 19), at nearby Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky.

While GE has a legacy stretching back to the days and numerous inventions of Thomas Edison, the company doesn't rest on its impressive longevity, nor does it stop seeking new ways to keep things hot, cold, frozen or clean. While the GE logo is blue, the company's appliances are decidedly green—with GE developing an ever-widening array of more energy-efficient and eco-friendly products under the company's banner of "Ecomagination." It's a direction that makes Paul and Paula proud. "We have a very strong brand, the only factory service network and a world-class logistics operation," Paul says. And how do they stay competitive in these tough economic times? "It's important that we emphasize GE's strengths," he says, "one of which is our customer service. It is important to handle customers' issues in a timely fashion. Problems will arise, no matter which brand you carry. The key is how you handle those problems. We always strive to let our customers and *their* customer know that we care."

Paul enhances GE's customer-service strategies with his own personalized credo:



“Effort and attitude [are] a few of the things that we, as individuals, have in our own control.” So, in spite of current economic concerns, his efforts remain diligent and his attitude upbeat—and he lauds the work ethic and cheerful nature of his rent-to-own sales partner, too. “Paula is the face of GE for the rent-to-own industry,” Paul says. Paula works directly with the independent dealers while Paul manages the Aaron’s account and is overall team leader. He organizes GE’s product displays and processes for the buying group shows, as well.

“Paul and I have worked together long enough so that we both know what each of us needs to do to accomplish

Fred never failed to give the same response with the same enthusiasm, no matter what was happening around him. He’s given me faith in myself and helps me to remember how fortunate I am every day.”

**P**aula and Paul’s good fortunes stem, in part, from working for a hometown enterprise that, like them, knows how to get ‘er done. The first product came off the line at GE’s Appliance Park in 1953 and now the sprawling complex manufactures refrigerators, freezers, ranges, dishwashers, washing machines, dryers, microwave ovens and room air conditioners—

more than 10 million appliances a year. Appliance Park is like a small city, with its own Zip code, volunteer fire department, EMS, power plant and police department. Within the 140-acre grounds, there are more than 20 miles of railroad track and 12 miles of paved road. Manufacturing space occupies 5.5 million square feet and office space takes up an additional 600,000 square feet. GE’s product warehouse—one of the largest in the world—occupies 47 acres, large enough to hold 650,000 appliances ready for shipping.

Along with such grand manufacturing capabilities comes an equally impressive national customer-support operation, based elsewhere in Louisville. It includes

a vast network of field sales managers, state-of-the-art distribution and order processing, and GE’s Answer Center, which offers product information and answers to repair questions to 3 million callers a year.

**W**ithin this massive operation, Paul and Paula tend to the concerns of rental dealers from coast to coast. When not in the office at Appliance Park, traveling to rent-to-own buying shows or visiting an Aaron’s account, Paul strives to perfect his golf game; as a child, he aspired to be a professional athlete. Paula is an avid movie watcher—Ed Harris, Meryl Streep and *Funny Girl* are cinematic favorites. However, both concede that their work keeps them plenty busy and allows little time for leisurely pursuits. That’s fine with them, though, because they like GE, the products they sell and the rent-to-own dealers to whom they sell them. While Appliance Park is an omnipresent force in Louisville, neither Paul nor Paula grew up with the dream of working there; it just worked out that way—to their benefit and the benefit of rent-to-own dealers, too. \*

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our goals,” Paula says. “Paul is a good friend and a great business partner. He has become a strong advocate for the rent-to-own industry and he truly cares about the business—we both do! It might sound somewhat flippant, but we get ‘er done!”

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The relationships she’s forged with rent-to-own dealers through the years inspires Paula to grow and maintain a positive attitude. She cites longtime RTO businessman and former Furniture and Appliances Now co-owner Fred Pearson as a model for positive thinking. “Whenever you’d speak to Fred and ask him how he was doing, he’d always tell you, ‘I’m having some of my best days.’