

Whirlpool



TOM
KITCHELL



NORM
SMILEY



JOE
EASON





What's in a name?

JUST WHO ARE JOE, TOM AND NORM?

**These departed
rent-to-own
vendors live on,
their names
indelibly linked
to key industry
events and
honors**

**By Neil
Ferguson**

If you've played golf at an APRO Convention, perhaps you've heard the names Joe Eason and Tom Kitchens. After all, the event is officially titled APRO's annual Joe Eason/Tom Kitchens Golf Tournament. If, at the same convention, you've attended APRO's Awards Banquet, perhaps the name Norm Smith rings a bell. The association's RTO Vendor of the Year award is named after him. Of course, many of you knew one or more of these rent-to-own vendors personally. But for those who didn't, there might be a bit of curiosity. Just who *are* these guys and what did they do to garner industry events and awards named in their honor? Wonder no longer.

Joe Eason was one of rent-to-own's pioneer vendors, involved in the industry since 1980, the same year APRO was founded. In fact, he was at the first meeting convened to discuss organizing a rent-to-own association. That year, Eason, along with Mel Daniel, initiated a rental finance division at Borg-Warner Acceptance Corp., a company for whom he'd worked since 1957. In 1987, Borg-Warner was bought out by Transamerica; Eason continued to provide RTO financing through Transamerica until he retired in 1990, at which time APRO named its golf tournament in his honor.

Eason's help in shaping the nascent rent-to-own industry is remembered with reverence by rental dealers and vendors alike. In a 1990 interview published in APRO's *Progressive Rentals* magazine, Eason recalled the early days of the business, when many vendors were reluctant to dip their feet into the rent-to-own water: "Our goal [as rental financiers] was not only to sign up dealers, but to call on vendors and manufacturers—

to make them aware that there was [a new] industry that needed to be served."

Eason, a Tennessean who majored in physical education at Arkansas State University, maintained a life-long interest in sports—including a particular passion for golf. He used the greens, as many in the industry do, to talk shop and make deals. His rent-to-own colleagues were eager to have Eason on their golf team during tournaments. "No matter how bad it's going, Joe always finds a way to turn it around," observed Mike Walts, then-president and CEO of Alrenco, in 1990, referring to Eason's golf prowess. "He's such a competitor that you want him on your side. He can keep you going when you're down."

When asked in 1990 how he felt about having the APRO golf tournament named in his honor, Eason replied: "I don't understand this. I'm not trying to be too humble—I just don't understand it." But others in the industry understood it well.

Tom Kitchens loved to laugh and finesse others to do the same. That is what comes to mind readily when APRO staffers remember his years as Whirlpool's key representative to the rent-to-own industry. "He always had a ready smile and charm that made anyone who met him want to spend time with him," recalls Cindy Ferguson, APRO's marketing director, who worked closely with Kitchens in her role as the association's vendor liaison. "Tom was a wonderful man to work with. His willingness to support APRO will never be forgotten."

Kitchens lived—along with his wife, Jennifer, and daughters, Kerry and Heather—in



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St. Joseph, Michigan; he died of a heart attack in September 1996 at the too-young age of 49. During his years of service to the rent-to-own industry, he served on APRO’s Vendor Advisory Committee (née Vendor Relations Committee) and, in 1993, was named APRO’s Vendor of the Year. He’s in Whirlpool’s National Sales Manager Hall of Fame, as well.

Kitchens’ close friend on the Vendor Advisory Committee was Zenith’s Norm Smith—whom we’ll learn more about in a minute. “I worked with Tom on many ventures, promotional activities and customer conventions over the years,” Smith said in 1996. “Tom and I developed a very close working relationship and I was proud to call him a true friend.”

“I can’t remember seeing Tom without that warm smile on his face. You could tell he was a man who enjoyed life,” says Shelley Martinek, APRO’s education director. “He did a lot to help shape our trade show and was a great supporter of the annual golf tournament held during the APRO Convention. Whirlpool sponsored the event for many years while Tom was with the company and Whirlpool continues to sponsor the golf tournament to this day.”

Both Eason and Kitchens died in September 1996 and, soon thereafter, APRO rechristened its annual event on the greens the Joe Eason/Tom Kitchens Golf Tournament.

As was the case with Eason and Kitchens, Norm Smith was known by his colleagues for his friendly demeanor. That and his suit jackets—pink, yellow, lime green, plaid. Always flashy. At any APRO event, you could see Smith coming from a mile away. “I know that my attire draws attention,” Smith confided to APRO Executive Director Bill Keese, “but for a salesman, that ain’t necessarily a bad thing!”

Smith—for whom APRO’s annual RTO Vendor of the Year award is named—knew rent-to-own as well as anybody and brought Zenith products into the RTO mix soon after the industry was established. “Zenith was interested in opportunities that could help

expand its market share; but the company realized that it did not understand rent-to-own and had done nothing to become a part of this business opportunity,” Smith recalled in 1997. In 1982, he was tapped to build Zenith’s rental division from the ground up. Over the next 15 years, he worked hard to do that building for his company and worked just as hard to nurture the health of the rent-to-own industry, serving on APRO’s Vendor Advisory Committee year after year.

Smith didn’t need a computer database to remind him of who his customers were. He pressed the flesh and made his business personal. “Sometimes I’ll see a customer’s name that doesn’t look familiar and I’ll ask Norm about it,” recalled Smith’s Zenith associate, Terry Martini, in 1997. “Almost all of the time, he knows a rental dealer’s name off the top of his head, without having to look it up. He knows the dealers and managers like his own family.”

Smith, who earned his bachelor’s degree in economics from Iowa State University, retired in 1997, but continued to offer his expertise and consulting to the industry until his 2008 death in Illinois at the age of 81.

Upon his retirement, APRO saw fit to honor vendors with the Norm Smith RTO Vendor of the Year award. Appending Smith’s name to the honor was the right thing to do, considering that the first rent-to-own Vendor of the Year recipient, awarded in 1991, was Norm Smith.

Eason, Kitchens and Smith are three rent-to-own vendors whose legacies endure. APRO pays homage to other names in the industry, as well. The trophy awarded annually for the highest achievements in rent-to-own is called the Buddy, in honor of industry rental dealer pioneer and APRO’s first president Bud Holladay (see RTOHQ: *The Magazine*, September–October 2009). Another rental dealer icon, Dave Egan, has his name attached to APRO’s annual Legislative Conference held in Washington, D.C. What’s in a name? In some instances, a lot. ✽