



# Al Zagorniak

RETIRED, SEARS CONTRACT SALES, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

**Al Zagorniak's good cheer and enthusiasm helped build bridges between APRO's vendors and rental dealers**  
By Neil Ferguson

If someone had thought to anoint Al Zagorniak with a nickname during his years in the rent-to-own industry, an apt one would have been “The Bridge.” As a Sears rep for almost his entire professional career, he nurtured many relationships with rental dealers, as well as his fellow vendors in the industry. He was awarded APRO’s Vendor of the Year honor in 1996 and in 1999 became the first vendor to serve on the APRO board of directors. His great sense of humor and charm made him an ideal liaison who strived to build bridges between APRO’s buyers and sellers.

“I belonged to 23 associations during my career and, in most cases, the only time they wanted you was when it was time to set up a booth,” Zagorniak recalls. “But APRO was different. It’s a very progressive association, as its name suggests. It services everyone in the industry—dealers and vendors.”

Although he retired from Sears in 2001 after 35 years of service, Zagorniak holds a great deal of enthusiasm for—and fond memories of—rent-to-own. One dealer with whom he had a special rapport was one-time Sears Retail Distribution/Central Service Manager Gary McDougal, who went on to operate American Rentals in Tennessee and served as APRO president from 1999 to 2002.

“When I was APRO president, I convinced the board of directors that we should have a vendor on our board—and Al was the guy,” McDougal recalls. “He was very active in helping us do a lot of things for the vendors. He was like the vendor ‘whip.’ He had a real talent for pulling them together and they were lucky to have him as their man.”

Zagorniak, though, is humble about his talents, confessing that one of his key assets was

knowing how to listen and take orders. “Years ago, I was being interviewed for a position within Sears,” he remembers, “and was asked, ‘Do you like being told what to do?’ I thought about it and figured that, when I go to church, the priest tells me what to do; when I go home, my wife tells me what to do; when I go to work, my boss tells me what to do. So I’m sure I wouldn’t know *what* to do if someone wasn’t telling me!”

While building bridges between APRO’s dealers and vendors, Zagorniak also sought to maintain a jovial atmosphere among his fellow associate members. Still, he never completely let down his competitive guard. “I attended an APRO conference in Puerto Vallarta one year,” Zagorniak recalls. “Also at the conference was [former APRO President] Bill White, one of Sears’ good customers in the Dallas area. I arrived at the airport for the trip back to the states only to find Tom Kitchens [a fellow vendor who worked for Whirlpool] and Bill sitting together at a table. I thought to myself, ‘Tom, you *rascal!* You’re after my customer!’ As the baggage handlers were loading our luggage, I approached Bill and Tom, gave a quick wink to Bill and told Tom that I hoped the dogs wouldn’t find the ‘Mary Jane’ that I’d put in his golf bag. Kitchens’ face turned red and we all had a great laugh on the way back to the states. I had to stay on my toes! It was a competitive environment, but, as vendors, we had fun together, too.”

Since retiring at age 57, Zagorniak has enjoyed good health with his wife of 44 years, Carol, a former Spanish and psychology teacher from Guatemala. They’re intensely proud of their two grown daughters, Cindy and Julie. “Both took advantage

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Al Zagorniak inherited this vintage 1969 Volkswagen Bug from his aunt. He drives it in car shows for charity and it has only 41,000 miles on it.

of the Maple Leaf, so it was a great deal. “It was the best civilian job I ever had,” Hennigan gushes. “We built the company from 50 stores to 150 stores all across Canada. It was fantastic.”

**B**ut in 1997, Hennigan was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Again, he returned to Dallas for successful surgery. Despite Hennigan’s protests, Reykdal persuaded him to employ his long-term disability insurance and retire. The insurance company required half-time Canadian residency, so Mac and Jan delightedly spent a couple of half-years in a cottage by the ocean in Nova Scotia.

The Canadian cottage couldn’t hold a candle to Oklahoma-based grandchildren, though. Reykdal convinced the insurance company to waive its residency requirement so that Mac and Jan could move closer to family.

“That helped me adjust to retirement, which I dearly hated,” Hennigan grumbles. “I still don’t like retirement much, but with six grandkids between 3 and 13, we manage to stay busy. And every summer, Jan and I get out of the hot weather in our 36-foot fifth-wheel [RV] and go somewhere cool for a few months.”

A second open-heart surgery was necessary in 2005, yet today, Hennigan says he gets up every morning feeling good. “Not even a headache,” he reiterates.

So, with two heart surgeries, a brain tumor, a Canadian sojourn and an early retirement, it begins to become more understandable how folks might figure Hennigan for a goner. He also mentions possible confusion with his brother, Murl, a central Texas ColorTyme dealer who died of leukemia a few years ago.

No doubt about it, *this* Hennigan is still alive and kicking; so if you didn’t send an appropriate gift of grieving and memoriam, then you might want to watch your back. “I didn’t get a single rose!” Hennigan chortles. “Well, you can tell them to save their money—they’ll probably get another chance one of these days. But not soon!” ✧

EDITOR’S NOTE: Whenever it happens—and we hope it’s not on our watch—rest assured, you won’t read it here first. Kristen Card is a freelance writer living in Austin, Texas.

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of their education and carved out great careers for themselves,” Zagorniak says. The younger of the two, Julie, graduated from the University of Missouri and now lives in California. Cindy graduated from Kansas State University and lives near Kansas City, Missouri, which is where the Al and Carol reside.

It was in Kansas City, while stationed at Richards-Gabaur Air Force Base, that Zagorniak started working for Sears in 1966. “[U.S. Army] General Robert Woods was president of Sears at the time and he favored hiring prior military personnel,” Zagorniak says, “because we were disciplined, knew how to take orders and had a strong work ethic.” Since his Air Force days, Zagorniak has called Kansas City home—and also deems it one of America’s “best-kept secrets. I love it here.”

Zagorniak stays busy with many post-career passions, including golf, travel, baking and driving his vintage 1969 Volkswagen Bug. Perhaps he’s most proud to be a member of Elks Lodge 26; he was instrumental in fostering that group’s involvement with reStart, a charity organization that aids the homeless. “reStart works to find housing for the homeless, run-aways and throw-aways—those children who have been abandoned by their parents,” Zagorniak says. “Throw-aways are the ones that really grip me.”

If he’s not at the 125-year-old Elks Club (one of the oldest in the country) or on the golf course, Zagorniak might be found in the kitchen. “I’ve always had an interest in cooking,” Zagorniak says. “When we were first married, Carol gifted me with enrollment in gourmet cooking classes. Soon after, I started baking yeast breads. I have my grandmother’s original recipe for holiday stollen and I bake more than 40 loaves every Christmas to give to my neighbors and friends. I have a collection of cookbooks that you wouldn’t believe!”

**T**o know Zagorniak is to like him. His generosity, enthusiasm and sense of humor are infectious—traits that served him well during his years in rent-to-own. When APRO moved into its current Austin location in 2000, Zagorniak provided Sears’ top-of-the-line appliances for the building, charging \$1 for the whole lot of them. Around that same time, he traveled to Austin to work alongside rental dealers and APRO staffers building a Habitat for Humanity home, and he donated the appliances for that house, as well. He was a handy craftsman during the Habitat project—a natural for someone so good at building bridges. ✧