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“When I got into the rent-to-own business, my son was just born. I had no job and no insurance,” says John Darden. “We had no electricity in our house; my wife had to take cold showers. We would drive down the road and collect Coke bottles for the deposit money, just so we could make sure we had enough gas in the car to get her to the hospital.”

## Coming around again

“There was an ad in the Norfolk [Virginia] newspaper,” he continues. “It was for a company called Remco and the classified ad read ‘Area manager needed’—which was a nice way of saying ‘collector and delivery guy’—‘six days a week, 60 hours a week, \$660 a month.’”

There was no way Darden could have known that by responding to that ad, he was launching a 30-year, roller-coaster ride of a career in rent-to-own. His journey included soul-searching, God-finding, a recurring business relationship with a man named Trooper, and an eventual partnership with his son, Christopher—the same baby whose dad was collecting discarded soda bottles to ensure his safe arrival into the world.

**CELEBRATING  
30 YEARS IN  
RENT-TO-OWN,  
JOHN DARDEN  
DISCOVERS NEW  
DEFINITIONS  
OF SUCCESS**

**An AProfile by KRISTEN CARD**

**D**arden, today one of three owners of Charlottesville, Virginia's Premier Rental-Purchase ([www.premierrents.com](http://www.premierrents.com)), is a native Virginian, born in Norfolk to a former police officer and his wife. When Tony Darden left the police force, he went to work as a manager for a company selling sewing machines and vacuum cleaners; Darden often accompanied his father on collection runs.

Darden's brother, Bob, contracted and became disabled by polio as a child, so the family's finances were often stretched by medical costs. While they never went without the essentials, there was little spending money to go around. Darden, a natural optimist, says it taught him

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to respect and value what he has.

Darden graduated from high school and married young, to his bride of 31 years now, Donna. A newborn and a newspaper ad later, Darden was working at Remco for a man named Joe Arnett.

“Joe hired me and he’s the one who really trained me on the ins and outs of the rent-to-own business as far as sales and credit,” says Darden. “I’ll always credit him with bringing out a positive attitude in me I didn’t know I had until I worked with him.”

Darden was with Remco for a couple of years, promoted first to assistant manager of the store, then to store manager. His upward climb suddenly struck a cement ceiling.

“I hit a block,” Darden says of his promotion to manager. “I was good at renting and collecting, but I didn’t have a clue about managing people. My regional manager at Remco was a yeller and a screamer, and I thought, well, that’s all you gotta do to manage people. It didn’t work.” Darden gives a chagrined chuckle. “I subsequently lost my job at Remco.”

Arnett had hired Darden once and he didn’t see any reason not to do it again. Willie Talley, vice president of rental operations at Curtis Mathes Corp, had hired Arnett away from Remco to oversee the startup of the company’s rent-to-own division. Arnett brought Darden on board in Texas, where Darden began an apprenticeship under Talley.

“Willie and my regional manager, Jerry Linaweaver, are the ones who really taught me about the management and financial parts of the rental-purchase business,” says Darden. “Jerry really helped me with the financial part,

while both he and Willie enhanced my managerial skills. I always recognized this as a customer-service business, but Willie really brought it home for me. He had a real passion for our customers.”

About a year-and-a-half later, Talley and Darden decided to launch their own ColorTyme store back home in Virginia. The Darden family settled in Charlottesville and, together with Talley, John and Donna opened their ColorTyme doors for business in August 1980.

“When we came here, people had never heard of rent-to-own before,” Darden remembers. “It was truly a family business—my daughter, Jamison, was still in a playpen we had set up in the back room and Christopher would run around the showroom while we unboxed TVs or took care of customers.”

It was while Darden and his wife were running their busy lives and fledgling company that Darden experienced a kind of rent-to-own epiphany, an incident that changed his way of thinking about his industry and remains a vivid recollection even now.

“We had a customer who came in to rent a TV from us,” recalls Darden. “The way you got to her house was you went down a paved road which became a gravel road which became a dirt road, which eventually turned into just a path. We went in to deliver this Rutherford console TV to her; and—I remember this like it was this morning—the lady had dirt floors, but everything in the house was spotless. I got down and hooked up the TV for her. They didn’t have an antenna, so I got a coat hanger and made a UHF antenna to put on the back of the TV for her and I fine-tuned in cartoons. It was the first time her family had ever seen color TV. I looked at this woman’s face and she was crying, she was so happy.”

“When I got back into my van, I had left the back door open and I had to ‘shoo’ out some chickens that had flown

in. Then I just sat in the van and I said to myself, ‘John, if you’ve ever questioned it before, this proves it. This is truly a customer-service business. Without ColorTyme, these folks wouldn’t have anything.’ And I’ve lived by it ever since.”

**W**ithin three years, Talley and the Dardens owned three stores and began hiring manager trainees. One of them had the memorable moniker Trooper Earle, and by 1990, the Dardens were selling their trio of stores to ColorTyme corporate. Darden went to work at a ColorTyme location he owned with Earle and Jerry Linaweaver. Later on in the year, Earle bought Darden’s and Linaweaver’s shares of the deal and became sole owner, with Darden continuing to run the company’s operations.

With Darden and Earle at the helm, the company grew to 16 stores within a year, making it among the largest ColorTyme franchises nationwide. Just a few years later, in 1995, unexpectedly, almost inexplicably, Darden decided to take a break from rent-to-own.

“I had a lot of things going on in my life,” Darden fumbles vaguely for an explanation. “I had hit a real high career-wise a few years earlier; I had been requested by ColorTyme to teach a class on selling at our national meeting and it was voted the number one seminar of the meeting. I think that is when my ‘block’ began. I was 42, so I don’t know whether it was a mid-life thing or I got physically tired or what. I can’t honestly tell you. I just wanted to try something else.”

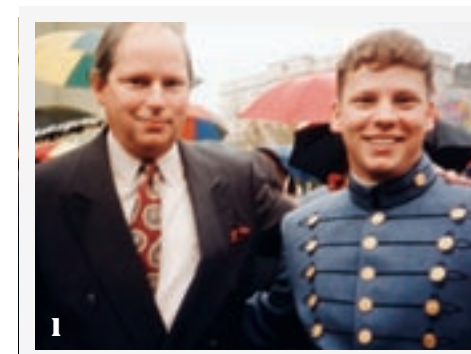
Darden spent the next five years with Trader Publishing Co, a leading publisher of classified advertising, where he achieved an unprecedented profit margin with a new magazine called *Auto Mart*. He also did some soul-searching.

“I started evaluating my life and I recognized what was a real kind of emptiness,” says Darden. “A friend of mine called me up one day and invited me to church with him. I started going to church and started a real relationship with the Lord.”

So when another call from a friend came in 2000 with a request to return to RTO, Darden accepted, but powwowed with his higher power over what it all meant.

“I remember praying to God, saying, ‘Why did you bring me back to the rental business?’” Darden says. “What I realized after a couple of years was that there was a need for the customers to be treated right. That’s what we’re preaching here. We’re really committed to our customers.”

The “here” Darden refers to is Premier Rental-Purchase, the store he opened up late last year with a strong sense of familiarity—*déjà vu*, even. Not only does Darden co-own the business with his son, Christopher, and friend and fellow RTO vet-



1. In 1990, with son Christopher, who attended the Virginia Military Institute. 2. Christopher and John Darden, 2006. 3. With wife, Donna, and their two children, Jamison and Christopher, 1987. 4. With Jamison, Donna and Darden’s granddaughter, Hayley, 2006. 5. With Trooper Earle at a ColorTyme meeting in 1991. 6. Darden and Mike Hubbard, 2006.



Premier Rental-Purchase owner Trooper Earle with John Darden at APRO’s 2006 Convention and Buying Show

eran Mike Hubbard, but daughter Jamison serves as their banker and the store is a franchise of the firm now owned by Darden's former management trainee, Trooper Earle.

"I see it as God giving me an opportunity to redo some things in my life," says Darden. "Not everybody gets a second chance."

**D**arden can't make it much clearer: At Premier Rental-Purchase, it's all about the customer, a tenet he has held to tightly since he and Donna opened their first family store more than 25 years ago.

"We were pretty innovative," acknowledges Darden. "If somebody was renting a product from us and they had to turn it back in, I didn't care when they came back—it

**"When APRO's up in Washington, D.C., talking with senators or congressmen, it's shining the truth on what we do. APRO puts into the proper context what we do and exposes the untruths often spoken about us."**

could be five years later—if I had something I could give them full credit on, something comparable, then we'd do it. I never want customers to ever feel like they're losing money by doing business with us."

This kind of customer commitment has kept folks coming back to Darden—some of them for decades, some for generations.

"I still have so many customers today that I had in 1980," Darden says. "Some of them still have TVs I sold them in the early eighties, and they say, 'John, you told me this was a good TV and you were right.' Now, I'm helping their children and their grandchildren. It's very gratifying and humbling.

"I've always believed the customers deserve the best quality product we can give them," he says. "Some companies think you shouldn't give customers the good stuff, because it will get beaten up or whatever. I raised my son to believe our customers are entitled to have the same sort of nice stuff we've been blessed enough to have, and our partner, Mike, shares this philosophy, too. Customers respect and appreciate that. And our customers know we're going to take care of them. If you're one day late, we're not out there banging down the door, demanding, 'Where's my product?' We work with our customers."

Darden says the success he and his partners are experiencing with Premier Rental-Purchase as his store approaches its first anniversary is primarily a result of just such customer care. While reluctant to talk too specifically about the company's business model or financial situation, Darden says that what they have accomplished in months rivals what some stores take years to reach. As for future growth, Darden is again rather tight-lipped, but indicates a slow-and-steady approach to success.

"We have a plan; we will be growing," confirms Darden. "We're considering opening up a new store next year, but we're just being very methodical about it. Back in the early days, it was all about grow, grow, grow. There were a lot of heartaches caused by growing too fast. Sometimes, I think we opened new stores before we were ready. It's not just about cash; it's about your mentality, your maturity. We're being very conscious of being proficient at everything we're trying to achieve. We're not doing anything halfway."

Despite its franchise status, Premier Rental-Purchase has an undeniable family feel. It's the only locally owned RTO shop in Charlottesville and likely among the few with direct, 24/7 access to its trio of owners.

"I think being able to go one-on-one with the owners really makes a difference with our customers," Darden says. "Our business cards have our cell-phone numbers on them, so if our customers ever want to reach us, they've got full access. Our pricing and service are our other competitive advantages. We don't say we'll beat anybody's prices; we just don't charge as much as others to begin with. And if we've got to be out there at 10 o'clock at night to fix something, we do it. I can say this with all conviction: Nobody's going to out-service us."

**C**atering to the customer via day-to-day nuts and bolts like attractive pricing and after-hours service is a key element of Darden's vision for success. The foundation of this customer-centric practice is Darden's absolute belief in his industry and the service it provides.

"I've been up and down in this business," concedes Darden. "I've seen it change incredibly, and all for the best. When I first got into the rent-to-own business, sometimes I was taking a real chance to tell people what line of work I was in. But I was proud to be in the rental-purchase industry, because I understood from day one what we were all about and it's really instilled a passion in me. It's truly about giving people the opportunity to get things in life they can't get without us."

Telling that story publicly, Darden says, has been the top priority of the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations (APRO), an organization he has a 15-plus-year history with, and of which he is a current member.

"I love what APRO has done to make the rental industry a real, legitimate part of the business community and of our culture," Darden says. "APRO legitimizes what we do. Having APRO fighting for us gives an independent deal like ours a real voice. When APRO's up in Washington, D.C., talking with senators or congressmen, it's shining the truth on what we do. APRO puts into the proper context what we do and exposes the untruths often spoken about us."

"I've made a lot of mistakes in 30 years, but I've got a lot to be proud of, too," says Darden. "One thing that's



been proven is that if you believe in your business and you're committed to your customers, then nothing else really matters."

**D**arden is a self-described "people person." Once you have talked with this garrulous Virginian, with his easy conversational style and mild Southern accent, you are bound to agree. Just ask what his favorite thing is about his job.

"Lovin' my customers," he replies. "We've watched each others' children grow, we've shared heartache...that's what this business is: It's relationships. Good customer service is going to come back around to you, and eventually, it's going to grow your bottom line. Isn't it incredible that you can have a profitable business and know that you're taking the best care of your customers that you can? Does it get any better than that?"

The only other topic Darden speaks of with such enthusiasm is his family: wife Donna, daughter Jamison and particularly his partnership with son Christopher.

"I remember when I was working with Trader Publishing, I'd go to a lot of car dealers where father and son were in business together," says Darden. "And I remember sitting out in my car one day and saying, 'Lord, I just pray for

the day when I can be in business with Chris.' I prayed for it and now it's happening, and it's just been a blast."

When he is not spending quality time at the store with Chris, Darden spends a lot of family time with his six-year-old granddaughter, Hayley. He also is extremely involved in his church and is active in politics, having successfully managed several campaigns for local politicians.

Darden is acutely aware of the many prayers that have been answered for him over the past three decades. Even though his meager past happened long ago, he continues to live his life and run his business as though it was just yesterday, which is just the way he wants it.

"The ability that I've been blessed with and that has helped me be successful is not forgetting where I came from," Darden says. "I can empathize with customers who are between a rock and a hard place. When it comes down to paying for a refrigerator or buying medicine for their kids, I want them to buy the medicine. They can pay me next week, or next month. I've been there, and I pray I will never lose that sense of understanding." ■

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