



FIVE YEARS AGO, GARY HUGHES DECIDED TO GO GLOBAL, IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING. ✂ "I SET A GOAL TO SEE 100 COUNTRIES BY 2003," SAYS HUGHES, PRESIDENT OF AAA RENT TO OWN, DBA COLORTYME. "IN NOVEMBER, WE'RE TAKING A CRUISE TO THE SOUTHERN AND WESTERN CARIBBEAN. I WILL BE VISITING ST. KITTS, DOMINICA, GRENADA, VENEZUELA, ARUBA, COLOMBIA AND GRAND CAYMAN." ✂ THOSE SEVEN COUNTRIES WILL BRING HUGHES' TALLY UP TO 80. YOU COULD SAY THAT WHEN THIS 63-YEAR-OLD BUSINESSMAN SETS A GOAL, HE MEANS IT. ✂ "I MAKE TRAVEL PLANS WITH THE SAME DILIGENCE AS I WOULD A BUSINESS MOVE," HE SAYS. "I MAKE RESERVATIONS EARLY TO GET THE LOWEST PRICES AND THE BEST ARRANGEMENTS, THEN I MAKE ALL OTHER PLANS AROUND MY SCHEDULED TRIP. BELIEVE IT OR NOT, EVERYTHING WILL STILL BE THERE WHEN YOU GET BACK." ✂ HUGHES KNOWS THIS TO BE TRUE FIRSTHAND. HE MAY TAKE TIME AWAY FROM COMPANY HEAD-QUARTERS IN CLARKSTON, WA, TO REALIZE HIS GLOBETROTTING GOALS, BUT HIS 24 STORES IN SEVEN STATES CONTINUE TO FLOURISH BACK HOME. FOR THE 12 YEARS THAT HE HAS BEEN IN THE RENT-TO-OWN BUSINESS, HIS COMPANY HAS RECEIVED COLORTYME'S "TOP 10 FRANCHISE" AWARD IN THE LAST NINE, CLAIMING THE "FRANCHISEE OF THE YEAR" TITLE TWICE. ADDITIONALLY, HE RECEIVED APRO'S RENTAL DEALER OF THE YEAR AWARD AT THE ANNUAL CONVENTION LAST SUMMER.

gary hughes:

going global



APRO'S
2002 RENTAL
DEALER OF THE
YEAR THINKS BIG
IN BUSINESS AND
IN RECREATION
A PROFILE BY
KATIE GARZA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
FAYE ROUGEAU



The most important thing I have learned is how to hire, train, motivate and retain good people," says Hughes. "People are everything. We pay more than most, but the most important thing is letting people know that you care for them, appreciate them and want what is right for them."

Hughes relates how some years back his accounting department confessed that it was too difficult to turn in their statements by the 10th of the month; they needed until the 15th to get the job done. Hughes turned the department's obstacle into a personally profitable challenge: Get those statements in by the 10th and I'll give the accounting department a \$2,500 bonus each time.

"Never again did I receive statements later than the 10th," Hughes says, noting that some staffers have even driven over to his house on the weekends or late at night just to make sure the paperwork is submitted on time.

"The other big lesson is 'what gets measured gets done,'" he says. "We attempt to measure performance on a weekly to monthly basis for everyone in the company and publish the results for everyone to see where they stand."

"People have a right to know how well they are doing and where they stand in the overall operation."

Secret shoppers regularly test the various services within Hughes' stores. From telephone sales to delivery drivers to in-store clerks and banking services, AAA

Rent to Own employees are evaluated for their performances. Employees with stellar scores are rewarded with bonuses and

other fun incentives, such as gift certificates and getaways. Hughes also uses the secret shoppers' findings to determine whether or not company policies need to be amended or updated.

Yet keeping close tabs on personnel issues within a 24-store operation can be taxing, so Hughes also has a full-time human resources person to help his store managers stay on top of their game.

"Personnel policies and employee reviews are things that you know you should do, but don't always get done," he says, "but I think it's extremely important in today's environment to follow through on these things."

Spreading the word

While Hughes focuses much of his attention on the inner workings of his company, the flipside of that coin is that he also makes strides to reach out to potential customers. Two years ago, Hughes decided that AAA Rent to Own needed its own ad agency to design and distribute direct-mail pieces and handle other print advertising projects. Yet Hughes quite possibly has made his company most visible through television.

"Over the years I've made some rather outlandish TV commercials," he says, citing instances in which he's imitated Clint Eastwood, a NASCAR driver and a WWF announcer. "Colortyme used my commercials nationally in 1999 and 2000."

Promoting the rent-to-own industry as a whole is also important to Hughes. He says he thinks that the industry is not properly understood by the general public or by lawmakers. After serving only one year as a board member for APRO, Hughes recruited more than 20 Colortyme franchisees to join the organization and speak out on behalf of the industry.

"I believe in APRO because we really need a political watchdog," Hughes says. "For me, serving on the board is like being a member of Rotary or the Chamber of Commerce; you're giving back to your community and the industry as you go."

Community spirit is what drew Hughes to Clarkston, WA, in the

first place, which is where he first ventured into the rent-to-own industry at age 51. Prior to establishing AAA Rent to Own with the assistance of then Colortyme field trainer Mark Childers (now AAA's vice president of operations), Hughes pursued a diverse array of occupations. He calculated mathematical probabilities as a statistician for Boeing; worked in the tax preparation business managing 20-plus store locations and established a manufactured home sales business that eventually expanded to 89 locations in 12 states and turned more than \$100 million in sales.

"I sold the [manufactured home sales] business and became semi-

retired in 1988, moving to a small town to enjoy living and being part of a small community," he says. But two years into semi-retirement, Hughes wanted back in on the action, if on a smaller scale. "I wanted to do something where I could be part of the community and not travel much," he says. "But, as it turns out, I've ended up traveling about 200 days out of the year."

A percentage of his traveling, however, has nothing to do with AAA Rent to Own and everything to do with his goal of visiting 100 countries by 2003. Accompanied by his wife (and often his wife's sister and husband), Hughes has explored the far corners of the Earth, twice and back—and he's still going strong.

Snapshots from abroad

Hughes has witnessed many memorable sights on his explorations, but he lists South Africa, Turkey and a train ride from Beijing, China, to Moscow, Russia, as some of the most remarkable trips to date.

Hughes' visit to Russia via train in the summer of 2001 wasn't his first experience in that part of the country. He had been there in 1986 when it was called the Soviet Union.

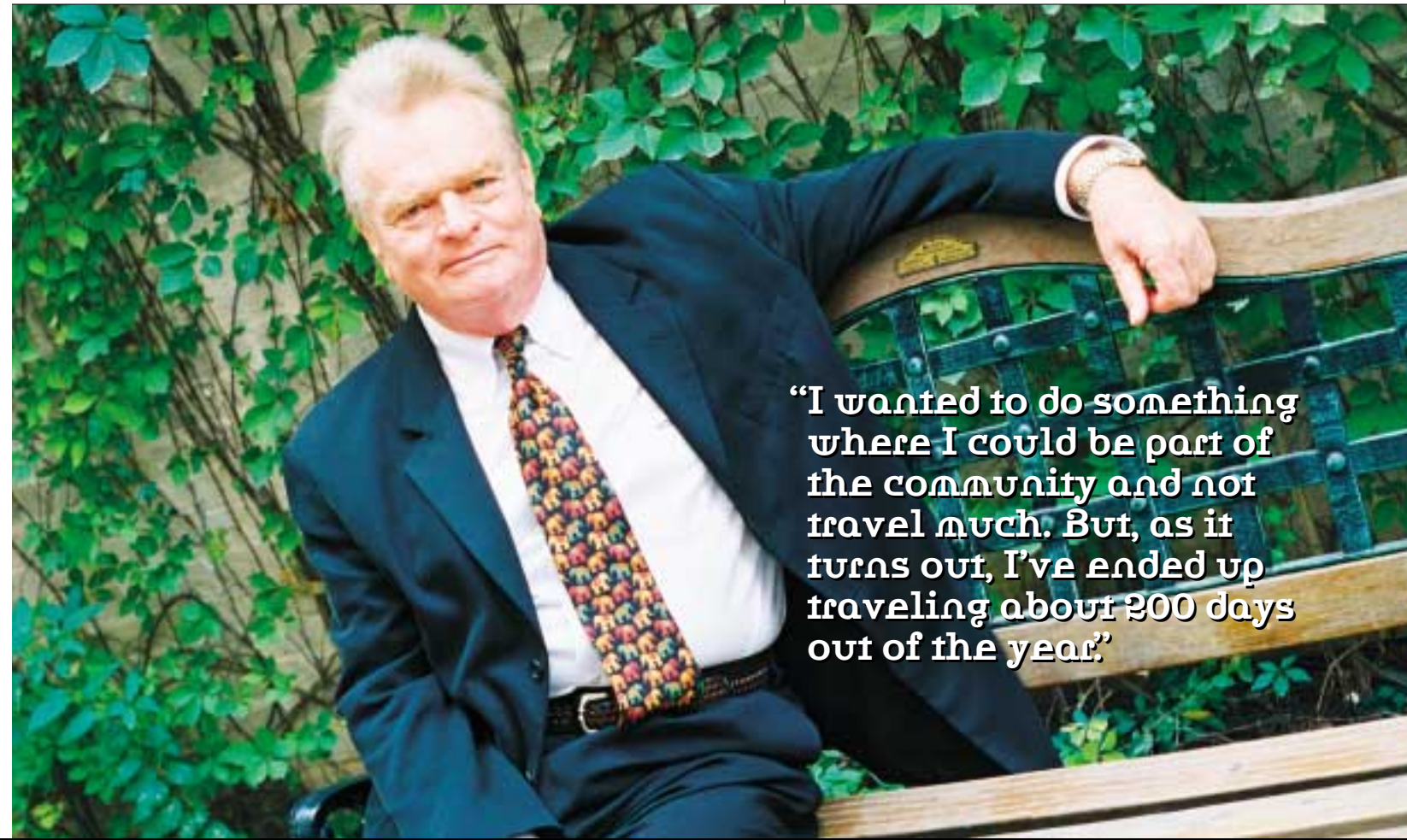
"Moscow is an exciting and vibrant city, not at all what the media had made it out to be," he says. "The Kremlin was absolutely beautiful, with colorful onion-domed churches everywhere. When we had visited during the Soviet Union era, everything was gray, including the people's faces. There were no consumer goods, no shops other than

agent in Windhoek, Namibia.

"My wife and I, with her sister and husband, took a four-week drive around South Central Africa, visiting Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa," he says, adding that most of the drive followed well-marked roads.

The group stayed in game camps, bed and breakfasts and hotels along the way.

"The animals were plentiful and we were able to get very close to them," Hughes says, then adds, "but one angry mother elephant let us know we were too close."



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the government store and very little that you could do without your official 'guide.'

"Now the city is open, free and rich with color," Hughes says. "There are well-dressed people, a wonderful, efficient subway system, fabulous designer shops, great restaurants and hotels, a circus and so much more. It was wonderful."

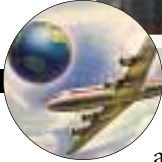
He says the landscapes in Siberia also surprised him. "It was nothing like I expected. It was beautiful, with rolling green hills, birch and pine forests, crystal clear streams and lakes and friendly people," he says.

Driving 2,000 miles through Africa in a rented Land Rover ranks at the top of Hughes' list as well. The trip was arranged through a travel

According to Hughes, their group was impressed with how easy their traveling was and that most people understood English. "The facilities, the food and the people were wonderful," he says. "Victoria Falls is one of the most impressive sights I have ever seen. Today some of the areas are having some political problems, but I feel that Botswana and Namibia are safe to visit."

On his trip to Turkey, Hughes found Istanbul to be "as mysterious as it is beauti-





ful.” He explored bazaars, relaxed at a Turkish bath and was entertained by belly dancers. He said the city, which lies on two continents, is a true mix of cultures.

“Where else can you see a man from Iran with his eight wives, covered from head to foot, sitting next to the pool and then have two topless German girls sitting at the next table?” he muses. Following their jaunt through Istanbul, they spent a week on a chartered, 56-foot sailboat, which they boarded at Marmarus on the southern coast.

“The water was so clear that you could

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JUTTA AND GARY AT VICTORIA FALLS, AFRICA, CAMEL RIDING AT THE PYRAMIDS IN EGYPT AND WITH SON GREG AT THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA.

see the bottom [of the ocean] at 30 feet,” he says, “and ancient ruins were all around to explore.”

After completing the Caribbean Island tour this November, Hughes and his wife won’t rest long before setting out again—this time for Delhi, India. From there, they will travel by train through Jaipur, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Swai Madhopur, Udaipur, Agara and Varanase, where they will catch a plane to Khajuraho and stay a few days.

Eventually they will come full circle, back to Delhi, for the return flight to Clarkston, where Hughes knows—quite well now—that AAA Rent to Own and everything else will still be there, awaiting his return. ■

Katie Garza is a free-lance writer.

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