

AN APROFILE
BY KRISTEN CARD

FOR KANSAS-
JIM BROWN,
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

IT WAS 1975 AND JIM BROWN WAS AT A CROSSROADS. HE HAD BEEN IN THE RENT-TO-OWN BUSINESS FOR A DECADE AND WAS THINKING ABOUT GETTING OUT.

"Y'KNOW, IT'S FUNNY HOW A LOT OF THE TRAILS LEAD RIGHT BACK HERE TO WICHITA."

ABC
RENT TO OWN



There came a time when we were trying to grow ABC [Rent-to-Own], and we just couldn't seem to get it up and going like we wanted," says Brown. "And it just wasn't a real pretty business back then. We were mostly dealing with welfare people and that sort of thing. We were at 90 percent of our marketing effort, but getting only 10 percent of the potential business.

"So I went down to Houston, Texas, and spent a week with Chuck Sims at his Remco stores," says

Brown. "I saw what he was doing—he was targeting his business more toward a middle-class population, upgrading his merchandise to brand-name and adjusting his prices some. He was doing a lot of business and becoming very successful. And I saw where we probably could do that, too.

"So I came back and started implementing some of that stuff and just right off, we started drawing, too. We became very successful doing it that way," says Brown. "I've always thought Chuck Sims was the first one to really revolutionize the rent-to-own business. He's one of the main reasons I'm so successful today. I can't thank him enough."

"Y'know," says Brown, "he's from Kansas, too. It's funny

Born and bred in this south-central Kansas city, 57-year-old Brown has simply never seen a reason to leave. If he ever experienced Dorothy Gale's feeling of not being in Kansas anymore, Jim Brown clearly didn't care for it.

Brown was a 19-year-old Wichita State University student when he began working part-time at Mr. T's in 1965.

"I was pretty young," says Brown, "and I thought it was a fun job. We went out and delivered and a lot of people we dealt with didn't even have telephones yet, so we did a lot of collecting in peoples' homes. I just thought it was fun. It wasn't hard."

Within a year of Brown's hire, Talley decided to move out of Wichita and on to bigger markets. He sold Mr. T's rental accounts to brothers John and George Parsons, the owners of competitor ABC Rental. Brown began working full-time for the Parsons brothers, managing the Wichita store and, when they opened up an Oklahoma City location, Brown oversaw it, too.

In 1972, the brothers decided to dissolve their partnership. George Parsons teamed up with Brown to run ABC's two Wichita stores; they also bought a Kansas City location. Brown and Parsons eventually sold the Kansas City store and opened up a third Wichita location. And those



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And that's how Jim Brown stayed in the rental-purchase industry—and stayed and stayed. Today, with almost 40 years under his belt, Brown is a tried-and-true RTO veteran, one of the few remaining charter members of the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations.

And he's right—it does seem a little more than coincidental how many RTO legends not only hail from the Sunflower State, but also happened to cut their professional teeth at Mr. T's Rental in Wichita. Ernie Talley, an industry pioneer and former CEO of Rent-A-Center, owned the business. Among his notable hires were Rent-A-Center founder Tom Devlin, Chuck Sims and Bud Holladay.

But while his RTO peers blazed trails away from Wichita, Brown is the one who stayed on the home front.

three Wichita-based stores make up the ABC Rent-to-Own chain today.

"When I was traveling back and forth, I didn't like being gone from home too much," says Brown. "I guess I kind of made the decision back then that I wasn't all that interested in going into markets outside of Wichita. I always think we can do better in our market here, expanding into different products, different areas. I'm satisfied being in this market, but we want to expand our stores and the business we do here."

Brown's heartland stick-to-itiveness and hometown devotion may well be what gives ABC Rent-to-Own its competitive advantage.

"We've offered better products and better service for a longer period of time than anybody else," says Brown.



STORE MANAGERS DAVID GAGE AND JOE BARTON WITH BROWN AND GENERAL MANAGER JORG ROGALSKI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG HACKER

"There's nobody else in this market who can say they've been in business close to 40 years, so that says something for itself.

"And that shows up in our repeating business," he says. "Once we get a customer, we usually keep him. I think if you offer your customers good service, good products at competitive prices, and always put your customers first—along with your employees—then you can't go wrong. Rent-to-own customers are not any different than regular retail customers. Their situation may be a little different from time to time, but they want good products, they want good service and they want to be treated fairly, friendly and with respect. It's just pretty simple, really."

Brown says he sees plenty of opportunity for expansion in the consumer/residential product area, in high-tech electronics, computers and higher-end furniture.

"We were the first Wichita store to rent color televisions and everybody thought we were nuts," says Brown. "But when we started to do that, we saw growth. The same thing happened when we got into renting furniture. I've always thought you have to find out what people want, find out where the need is. Then just meet it and you're there."

Despite his longtime partnership with George Parsons, Brown might sound like he's used to running his business alone. But that's only partially right.

Parsons was actively involved in the company at the

beginning of their partnership, but for the past 20 years or so, Brown has been directing the day-to-day activity of ABC Rent-to-Own while Parsons developed a real estate business, became politically active and consulted from the sidelines.

So when Parsons, 73, succumbed to advanced Parkinson's disease last October, Brown knew how to keep the business running smoothly. What he didn't know was how to fill the hole where Parsons' invaluable insight and camaraderie had been.

"We officed together, saw one another every day," says Brown in understated brevity. "We were together over 37 years. It's a sad thing. I really miss him."

Part of the legacy Parsons left behind is Brown's continuing participation in APRO—particularly in the organization's government relations and legislative efforts.

"In the late '70s and early '80s, [George] began to get more involved in politics at the local level, the state level and, finally, the national level," says Brown. "Then, about 10 years ago, he went with me to Washington for the APRO legislative trip and really opened some doors for me.

"Together, we developed good relationships with all our congressmen, our senators and everybody in their offices. We were able to persuade all four Kansas congressmen and both of our senators to co-sponsor the [rental-purchase industry's] federal legislation. I'm really proud of that—



it's very important and a very big achievement for me and for our trade organization."

Through his individual efforts, Brown has illustrated his strong belief in APRO's work to secure HR 996/S 884, the Consumer Rental-Purchase Agreement Act. But he also realizes the power of strength in numbers and hopes APRO's aspirations to grow its membership come to fruition.

"As far as industries go, we're still probably sort of young," says Brown. "But any industry, any business, cannot operate to its full potential without a good trade organization like APRO. As you look across the country, every successful industry has a successful trade organization supporting it. You've got to band together if you're going to get anything done and have a good quality organization. I'd put APRO up against anybody."

As a charter member of the organization, says Brown he's definitely satisfied with APRO's current direction, leadership and priorities, which include approval of the federal bill, addressing health insurance issues and enhancing industry ethics standards.

"Well, I said it before, but early on, the rent-to-own business wasn't really well-respected," says Brown. "Chuck Sims figured it out and helped me and was instrumental in helping the trade organization do something about it. One of the things I'm proudest of professionally is the way the industry, and even ABC [Rent-to-Own], has turned the business around to where it's a valued, well-respected business and how now we all can be proud to be in the rent-to-own business."

Yep, Jim Brown sticks around—and not just professionally. A committed family man, he's been married for 36 years; he and his family have lived on the same acreage just outside Wichita for more than two decades; and, while he enjoys fishing and hunting, he's typically spent his weekends rodeoing—team and calf roping—since he was 21.

So what about all those new-age gurus who insist you've got to smash the molds, break the patterns and take risks to make progress? Plainly put, Brown isn't buying.

"People have asked me through the years, 'How have you been able to be successful?'" says Brown. "And my answer is that it's really not all that difficult. If you show up every day and you honestly do your job, well, that's about 75 percent of it right there. And then you always watch for new ways to improve things."

Brown might consider adding one more essential element to that simple formula: When you find something you like, stay with it. Sometimes, it's gets even better.

"There was a time in our industry—and a lot of people won't admit this—but sometimes, when people asked you what you did for a living, you'd mumble it under your breath," says Brown. "But nowadays, everybody can hold their head high and I think it's just fantastic."

"I've always liked the rent-to-own business. Still do. That's really about it."

Kristen Card is an independent business writer in Austin, TX.



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