



# All in a day's work

**PROFILES OF  
THIS YEAR'S  
RENTAL-PURCHASE  
EMPLOYEE OF  
THE YEAR AND  
CUSTOMER OF THE  
YEAR AND THEIR  
RUNNERS-UP**

**F**or the past four years, APRO has held an annual nationwide contest searching for a rental-purchase employee and customer who clearly stand apart from their peers in their work ethic and through community involvement. Entry forms are sent out in the spring asking for nominations and by early July, a panel of judges culled through the most compelling stories to select two individuals who serve as examples to their peers, friends and families.

**By Julie Sherrier | Illustration by Larry Goode**



Each winner deserves this special recognition for not only what they contribute to the industry, but also for their humanitarian deeds that have nothing to do with rent-to-own. These individuals truly characterize the many different types of people who work within the industry and the wide variety of compassionate customers we serve. APRO presents a choice of a travel package for two to the annual convention or its equivalent to each winner. Awards are presented during the Association's annual convention, which was held August 12–15 in Reno this year. Here are the year's winners and the runners-up:



**2003 APRO  
EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR:  
ANTHONY ROBINSON  
RENT-A-CENTER  
LAKEWOOD, CO**

When people refer to single parenthood, the image that comes to mind is usually that of a working mom. Anthony Robinson, 36, of Lakewood, CO, presents a sharp contrast as he is a single parent of four girls and a boy. Robinson is a busy account manager at a Rent-A-Center store who makes his customers—and his kids—feel that they are his first priority. Of course, his children are the ones who really come first, but don't tell his customers that.

"As an account manager, I have my own set of customers who know they can call on me personally when they need me. I am on a first-name basis with my customers and am dedicated to giving the best customer service I can," says Robinson.

When asked how he manages to balance his long hours at the store and managing the lives of his children, Robinson is quick to respond. "I drop them all off at school in the morning and take a late lunch break to pick them up when school is out to bring them home and get them started on their homework. I buy lots of frozen foods in case I'm not home from work at dinnertime to cook for them," he says.

Robinson's daughters are T'shinae, 11, and Jacorrie, 5. He adopted his sister's daughters, Mary, 17, and Champagne, 14, who were left without a home after their mother died from cancer two years ago. Robinson's son's primary residence is with his mother.

"I had to step up and be responsible rather quickly," says Robinson. "My choices became pretty easy to make. I could have gone the route of gangs and drugs, but I knew I wasn't going to let my kids go down that path with me."

Robinson made a choice early on when he took part in Street Beat in Denver, a program for at-risk or troubled youth. "We had a dance troupe and used to perform all over Denver," he says. "I went there as an

opportunity after high school and became a member and then an instructor."

While his responsibilities as a primary provider grew, Robinson continued to work with troubled youth at Street Beat. His mentoring role often followed him home as he counseled children and parents over the phone. "I wish I was still in that business, but the funding was cut," he says.

Today, Robinson works at the Lakewood Rent-A-Center and recently moved his family to a better home in nearby Aurora, CO. His dream is to one day open a small restaurant.

"My focus is the kids because they need somebody," says Robinson. "That's my drive to keep going. I don't have that 'quit' in my system."



Anthony Robinson (center) is presented with the 2003 Rental-Purchase Employee of the Year award from Rent-A-Center's Chris Korst, APRO's 2002–03 President Gary Romine and Rent-A-Center's Matt Harveson and Mitch Fadel.

EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

**Kent Hoffman,  
Full-O-Pep Appliances, Martinsville, IN**

Fast thinking is what helped quite a handful of Martinsville, IN, townspeople after a tornado ripped through the town in September 2002 and left many homeless. Full-O-Pep Appliances' Ken Hoffman spent countless hours organizing, promoting and finding products from Full-O-Pep's 33 store locations throughout the state to hold a benefit auction for the tornado victims. The auction raised \$11,000 of which 100 per-



cent was donated to the local chapter of the Red Cross and to the Martinsville Tornado Relief Fund.

Hundreds of people showed up for the auction and were extremely relieved to be able to replace their furnishings at such good prices. "We heard a thousand thank you's that day and many of the people said they would never forget that Kent and the staff were there for them. Full-O-Pep and the rent-to-own industry are grateful to Kent for his hard work, kindness and

was hired at Baber's in 1991 in an under-performing store. Under his leadership, that store became one of the most profitable and Williams developed a reputation as a manager who took care of his customers and developed a loyal customer base.

Due to his excellent leadership skills, Williams was promoted to district manager and earned the honor of "District Manager of the Year" two years in a row. Not only is Williams a corporate leader, but he is also

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his 20 years of service to the industry," says Full-O-Pep General Manager David P. David.

Hoffman and his wife, Peggy, are also supporters of hospice and have been known to make anonymous contributions to families in need and to help out their own neighbors and families during hard times.

**Tracy Lewis, Kelly Rentals, Danville, LA**

Tracy Lewis, district manager at Kelly Rentals in Danville, LA, is one of the company's only employees who regularly attends the annual APRO Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., in order to promote the industry's federal legislative agenda. He has been instrumental in generating co-sponsorships for both HR 1701 and HR 996 from Congressmen from Virginia and North Carolina.

Lewis was the second person hired at Kelly Rentals in 1984. He has moved up the ranks from account manager to district manager. The store values Lewis' 19 years of service to the company and credits its success to Lewis' positive attitude and solid work ethic. His honesty, patience and respect for others are virtues contributing to the fact that he has never received a customer complaint.

Lewis and his wife, Diana, also are affiliated with a local chapter of Domestic Violence Emergency Services. Lewis recently participated in DOVE's annual fund-raising event to help support its efforts in the community.

**Danny Williams, Baber's, Columbus, MS**

Known affectionately by employees in his district as the "Tasmanian Devil," Danny Williams sweeps into his stores like the whirling cartoon character in his zeal to improve the store's performance. Williams

a compassionate and caring community and church leader. He is a deacon of his church, a choir member and a Sunday school teacher. He has gone on mission trips to Maryland and West Virginia to help build a new church and to assist the needy.

Williams also has lent a hand helping his neighbors in Columbus in the aftermath of two devastating storms by working endless hours sawing and removing trees off houses and helping with repairs. He participated in the industry's Habitat For Humanity Austin build several years ago, braving 90-degree heat to construct "The House that APRO Built." And, last but not least, Williams helped a fellow employee by replacing household items anonymously when that employee lost his home to a fire.



**2003 APRO  
CUSTOMER OF THE YEAR:  
DONNA BROWN  
BABER'S  
TUPELO, MS**

Baber's customer Donna Brown firmly believes that she survived a very difficult childhood in order to share her story with others. "God left me here to tell my story," says Brown. "I want to help other people because I've been helped."

A minister and evangelist, Brown was raised by an alcoholic mother who was unable to hold down a job and, eventually, a home. "I had to overcome a lot of anger from my childhood," she says. "Just because you're a minister doesn't mean you have it all together. We all have to overcome things."





Donna Brown (second left) with her husband, James (center) is presented with the 2003 Rental-Purchase Customer of the Year award from APRO's 2002-03 President Gary Romine and Cynthia Baber-Strunk and Shannon Strunk.

Brown is a frequent, longtime customer at Baber's in Tupelo. "She's a great customer," says store manager Edith Mills. "She is friendly, smiling and always pleasant to be around," says Mills. Over the years, Brown has rented to own a washer, two dryers, living room furniture, a home entertainment system, electronics and jew-

cancer and may not have long to live. Preparing for the worst, she recorded audio messages for her only son for the special events in his life such as high school graduation and marriage in the event that she would not be there.

While fighting and surviving cancer, Lawson has raised her son and helped to care for her ailing father, grandmother and other family members as well. She currently awaits the birth of her third grandchild. She is quick to credit her faith and God for helping her get through the tough times. "None of this would have happened without God on my side," she says.

### Johnnie Davis, Baber's, Natchez, MS

Johnnie Davis is a single mother and a frequent, longtime Baber's customer who is very dedicated to her raising her children. She never complains and always has a smile, reports the staff at the Baber's store in Natchez, MS. Davis is always looking out for someone else. For example, she works for the Stew Pot, a local charity, to make sure that no one goes without a

**"I had to overcome a lot of anger from my childhood. Just because you're a minister doesn't mean you have it all together. We all have to overcome things."**

elry. "The people at Baber's are honest and treat me with respect," says Brown. "Because of Baber's, I now have something to leave behind for my children," she says.

Brown also works at a local Red Lobster restaurant, but her true calling is helping others in need. It is not unusual for her to get a call to come to the hospital to visit someone who is ill. She is a regular visitor to nursing homes to cheer up the elderly. She exudes a calm, warm presence and offers comforting prayers to those in need of healing. Brown has spent a great deal of time counseling a young mother struggling with drug addiction and has even taken on the responsibility of helping to raise this woman's child.

Through her generosity, insight and caring, Donna Brown is truly a shining star in her community.

### — CUSTOMER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS —

Melinda Lawson,  
American Rentals, Columbus, IN

**M**elinda Lawson was the first customer at the American Rentals store in Columbus when it opened in 1982. Lawson is proud that her entire home is furnished with products from the store. Four years later, Lawson receiving devastating news that she had

hot meal. While she is scheduled to leave at 2 p.m. every day, she stays to start the next day's meal. She truly exemplifies a generous community spirit.

### Hursey Willingham, Baber's, Tupelo, MS

**H**ursey Willingham has been a dedicated customer at Baber's for many years. He says he likes doing business with the staff at Baber's because he knows he can get exactly what he wants when he wants it. Almost everything in his home has been acquired through the Tupelo store. Willingham and his wife, Gracie, have been married for 26 years and have three children and three grandchildren. Willingham has worked at Cooper Tire for 15 years and is a lead supervisor. He also is a deacon at his church.



**A**s you can tell, choosing a winner from this exemplary group of contestants presented a tough challenge. All of the entries do show us the wonderful variety of people associated with this industry. With employees and customers like them, the industry has more than enough reason to celebrate and honor those who bring just that little bit of extra care and concern to their communities. ■