

TENNESSEE'S  
LARRY GOAD  
TAKES THE  
RURAL ROUTE TO  
A SUCCESSFUL  
FAMILY BUSINESS  
AND THE REVIVAL  
OF A STATE RTO  
ASSOCIATION

## A LITTLE BIT COUNTRY

## A LITTLE BIT RENT-TO-OWN

**I**f there's one thing you can count on with Larry Goad, it's that he's always on-call—almost literally. If his cell phone has a signal, he says, then he's going to answer it when it rings. And just to prove it, the Tennessee native conducts a lengthy telephone interview while clearing land in the heart of West Virginia. ☞ “There's a little church starting up out here in Oak Hill, West Virginia, and they've been meeting in a garage,” Goad explains. “They've got about ten acres of land they've bought and we're on a youth mission trip to clear it for them, so they can build themselves a church.” ☞ This simple, if rather unusual, revelation typifies Goad: He's a self-proclaimed “country fella,” passionate about the Lord and passionate about helping people. And he always answers his phone, because it could be a call about one of his other two passions: his family or his family business.



AN APROFILE BY KRISTEN CARD  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEIL FERGUSON

**G**oad is president of Zion's Rental-Purchase, a five-store operation headquartered in Harrogate, TN—just about where the Volunteer State meets the Kentucky/Virginia borders. And no, the name has no religious connotation; it was simply the last name of Goad's father-in-law, James Zion, who launched the company in 1976. Today, Goad runs the business with the full-time help of his wife, Michelle; his sister-in-law, Jamie Zion; his mother-in-law, Georgia Zion (who now owns the company) and his own mother, Pam, who acts as operations manager. To some, this set-up might seem a little, well, nepotistic. But Goad is unapologetic. 🌀 "We're a family-owned, family-run business," he says, "and that's what we like about it."

Larry Goad's introduction to the rental-purchase industry was through family, but it happened many years before he met Michelle. Goad grew up in the small east Tennessee community of Luttrell—where the claim to fame is being the hometown of country music legend Chet Atkins and Country Music Association 2004 Entertainer of the Year Kenny Chesney. (What do you expect from a place with seven state songs?) One of three kids, with divorced



LARRY WITH HIS WIFE, MICHELLE

parents, Goad originally discovered the world of rent-to-own through his mom.

"My mother needed a refrigerator just like anybody else," remembers Goad. "Working as a waitress for two dollars an hour plus tips, a single mom raising three kids, there was no way she could afford to buy one herself. So that's how I got to know about rent-to-own—my mother became a customer."

Many of the family's appliances came from their local rental-purchase store. So years later, when Goad could no longer afford to

continue his education at Indiana's St. Joseph's College and moved back home to complete his business degree at a Knoxville junior college, he remembered how well rent-to-own had worked for his family and he went down to Zion's to rent a stereo.

A few years later, Goad met his future wife while they were both working at K-Mart. ("I tell everybody I got her on Blue Light Special," Goad jokes.) Michelle's surname, Zion, rang a bell for Goad, and sure enough, Zion's Rental-Purchase belonged to her dad.

"When she found out I used to be a customer, the first thing she wanted to know was, was I a good customer," chuckles Goad. "She wanted to know whether I was late with payments—she even went to the store and pulled my file to see whether I paid. So I'm glad I paid on-time!"

As Goad and Michelle grew closer, he spent more and more time around her family. As soon as Goad graduated, James Zion offered him a store manager position at the Knoxville store. Goad accepted, trained for about a week at another store and went right to work.

"It was sort of tough coming in as a manager," Goad confesses. "Having to learn that way—being tossed straight into the fire—and being that young, was difficult. I was 21 years old, running the store, and all the employees were older than me and had more experience than I did. It was a difficult situation."

Today, Goad credits his ultimate success as a manager to the wisdom he gleaned from his father-in-law, day in and day out.

"My father-in-law was a great man and a good teacher," says Goad. "I always say, he taught me the business from the basement up. I started as a manager, but I've done every job you can do. It's good to be able to look at my employees now and tell them, 'I've done what you're doing, I know how it operates, I understand the frustrations.' It's hard to relate to employees if they don't know you've done the exact same thing. It's hard to gain their respect, because that's something that's earned, not given."

Eleven years later, when James Zion decided to retire, Goad was his natural choice to head the business. Zion died just two years later.

"When my father-in-law turned the company over for me to run, it was one of my proudest moments," Goad says. "The fact that this is something he started from nothing—with very little money he went into business on his own—and under his power built it up... The fact that he trusted me and in my ability enough to turn over the reins to me was a little overwhelming, really."

**W**hen Goad talks—in his deeply Tennessean accent—about Zion Rental-Purchase, two names come up again and again: his father-in-law's, and God. For example, Zion had five stores when Goad joined the company in 1988; today, following a bump up to six stores for a while, the company once again has five thriving stores—one in Tennessee, one in Virginia and three in Kentucky. Some might interpret this as a lack of ambition, but Goad sees it as a competitive advantage.

"My father-in-law taught me that the customer relationship is

what gives you the edge," relates Goad. "By being a smaller company, we have the luxury of having a more intimate relationship with our customers. We don't sell products; we sell customer service. When you go into a bigger store, it's sometimes hard to satisfy the customer, because the manager doesn't have the liberty to solve problems as ours do. If a problem comes up that's above the manager's head, they know I'm one phone call away. No matter where I am, we can get the problem solved and get the customer taken care of immediately. My father-in-law was a firm believer in the family-business concept, and as a family business, there's less bureaucracy and a more direct chain of command. Our customers know our employees have direct access to me. I'm the president of the company, chief mechanic, head bottle-washer and groundskeeper. This company has no executives."

But with or without executives, doesn't Goad want to grow the business, make more money, gain more power? Not really.

"I want to concentrate on same-store growth; I'm not really interested in running a thousand stores—I've got five right now, and sometimes wonder whether that's four too many," Goad jokes. "We want to grow, but we've got no aspirations for being huge. We want to be able to serve our customers and make a decent living. That's all we need."

Goad speculates about the potential for opening up one or two more Zion's locations, probably in Tennessee, over the next decade or so. But he claims to have "no great desire to be a rich man,

money-wise. I'm incredibly rich as it is: the Lord has blessed me with a wonderful family, home and business. We're content with that."

This devout Southern Baptist attests that the greatest contributor to his success to date, in business and in life, is his faith. "I'm a Christian, and we try not to do anything without consulting with 'The Boss' first," explains Goad. "That's the way we try to live our lives. Everything I've got comes from God, all good things come from the Lord, and we try to acknowledge and appreciate that, first and foremost."

While Zion Rental-Purchase isn't billed as a Christian company *per se*, Goad says his belief system definitely translates into his day-to-day dealings. "Listen to the Lord," he immediately answers when asked his best advice for industry colleagues. "We try to oper-

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ate by the Golden Rule: You treat others like you expect to be treated. When a customer comes in angry about something, they feel like they've been wronged. You've got to put yourself in their position. Whether the customer is right or wrong is irrelevant; how would you want to be treated? Number one for us is always with respect.

"Secondly, listen to your employees," Goad continues without missing a beat. "They're on the front lines every day, and if you've got to be in an office somewhere running the company, then you're not on the front lines. So listen. If you trust them to run the store for you, then trust them to give you worthwhile comments and advice.

"And third, [upper management] might run the company, but we're human, and we screw up just like employees do. So when you do, admit it," opines Goad. "Don't be afraid to say in a managers' meeting, 'I messed up. I dropped the ball on this one, so let's back it up and punt, and do it the right way.' If you mess up, there's nothing wrong with that; we all do it. The only time you've got a problem with it is when you don't accept and acknowledge that you messed up, and try to learn from it."

**N**owadays, Goad is using his rock-solid faith and lessons learned not only to continue to lead his company, but also to resurrect the Tennessee Rental Dealers Association (TRDA).

"TRDA has been in existence for years, but has been very, very inactive," Goad explains. "When I first found out that we even had a association, I inquired about it with the president at the time, and he just flat-out told me, 'Well, we don't really meet, we don't really do anything.' They were so inactive, they weren't even charging dues. I went to one meeting in Nashville, and agreed to be on the board, thinking we were going to get things rolling again, but it never happened. I didn't like seeing our association being so inactive, and wasn't really sure I knew what to do, but I figured anything would be more than what we were doing, so I was willing to try it."

Since agreeing to serve as presi-

dent of the association last year, Goad's immediate focus has been on membership recruitment. Apparently, TRDA has been promising action to the state's rental dealers for years with no follow-through. So Goad and a team of four volunteers—including his wife, Michelle, who currently serves as the association's secretary/treasurer, and board members Chris Bolin, Carl Elgin and Eddie Ford—are leading TRDA in the face of a certain cynicism from their colleagues, who feel the group has "cried wolf" much too often. Nevertheless, the newly resuscitated association held its first membership meeting last spring in Nashville, which Goad says had a "promising turnout." The next step, says Goad, is to begin to establish an industry presence at the state capitol, to help inoculate the industry from potentially damaging public policy.

"Right now, we're fortunate that we don't have any fires to fight on [Tennessee's] Capitol Hill, and we want to keep it that way," he says. "We've got to let our legislators know we're here, who we are and what we do, and that our door is always open. We need to make sure our faces are seen enough that when a situation concerning our industry comes up, [lawmakers] can think to themselves, 'The TRDA's been here before, let's talk to them. Let's call them and see what they have to say about it.'"

Goad is definitely a true believer when it comes to associations like TRDA and the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations, and the work they do to unite the rental-purchase industry. In fact, getting involved with APRO and getting to know many of his professional peers nationwide through the organization's events is one of Goad's favorite things about his job.

"When we come together, the rent-to-own industry is so good about sharing information, it blows my mind," effuses Goad. "There's no need to reinvent the wheel—if someone's already been there and done that, by being part of an association, you can learn from them. They've already driven down that road, they know where the potholes are and can tell you where they are and how to avoid them. We can be competitors across the street from each other, but when it comes to the national scene, we're all on the same team. Everyone is so willing to help each other out—that's what I like best about rent-to-own."

But socializing and sharing trade secrets is the tip of the industry iceberg for Goad. He recently ran for—and won—a seat on the APRO Board of Directors on a "small company" platform, saying, "I want all small companies to have a voice, as the needs of small companies can be somewhat different than those of larger ones." Goad says that while



JAMES ZION

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**STANDING: MICHELLE GOAD, JAMIE ZION, GEORGIA ZION AND PAM GOAD. SEATED: LARRY GOAD. PHOTOGRAPH BY EMORY MINTON JR.**

rental-purchase has come a long way, he strongly believes that through unity, RTO can go even further.

"We have something to offer in rent-to-own," Goad begins. "Our business is so unlike any other business out there, and the negative attitude about us is still out there, even among some people I consider my dear friends. The culprit is ignorance, and I mean that in the purest form, the actual definition of ignorance: they just don't know. They don't know what it's about and because of that lack of education about it, they have the wrong perception of it. The only way I can see to combat that ignorance about our industry is to be united. There are just so many benefits to being united. At the national level, for example, if one person goes to Washington on his own, well, he's not going to get anywhere. But if APRO goes with the backing of the industry behind them, well, that carries some weight. Together, we can just get so much more done."

**T**hat gravitation toward togetherness, willingness to extend a helping hand, belief in the family business and devotion to a higher power—these are all clearly connected for Larry Goad, and they touch every part of his life. When he's not leading Zion Rental-Purchase, revitalizing the Tennessee Rental Dealers Association, intensifying his commitment to APRO, trouble-shooting via telephone, or clearing West Virginia brush, Goad's top two pastimes are: (1) spending time with Michelle and their two children, Mason, 13, and Abby, 10; and (2) performing mass feeding through Southern Baptist Disaster Relief.

"I love to help people, which is why I'm deeply involved in disaster relief," says Goad. "Our church association has a mass feeding mobile unit—a trailer about eight feet wide and twenty feet long—and we have a written agreement with the American Red Cross; anytime within the continental United States that the Red Cross is serving a hot meal, the Southern Baptists cooked it. Last year, we

naturally spent a lot of time in Florida, with all the hurricanes. At one point, we were there just over a week, and we cooked and served about 40,000 meals.

"I'm an outdoorsman—I love to camp and hunt," he continues. "When you're going [into a disaster-relief situation], you're roughing it. Chances are, there won't be electricity, there may not be clean water. And I love the people involved in disaster relief, because you've got to have a passion to do it, to leave the comforts of your home and go suffer through the heat or cold, and work like a borrowed mule... It's amazingly rewarding."

Larry Goad is definitely following in the footsteps of the two biggest influences in his life—the Lord and James Zion (in order of importance). And though the footprints were made by some of the largest proverbial shoes a man might encounter, Goad seems to be filling them with confidence, conviction, and salt-of-the-earth success.

"I'm a lot like my father-in-law," concludes Goad. "I'm just me. I'm a country boy and I'm proud of it. I don't put on airs, I just put on my britches one leg at a time. I think my employees see that; they see that I'm, well, the kids call it 'real.' Y'know, be real. You can only be what you are, and I think that's the way I am." ■

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