

When people ask me why I belong to APRO and why I stay so involved, my first response is the glow that must appear on my face as the answer is stored deep in my heart. My love affair with this Association was born in the spring of 1981. My first RTO employer selected a number of staff to attend a seminar in Cincinnati by a young man who was to become an industry icon. It was at this meeting that I first met Ed Winn.

I will never forget the message he would deliver that day. While he spoke about the need to rec-

Triple my dues

ognize professional collection practices (and that by doing so meant we would lose a few televisions once in a while), his real message was that we all needed to learn how to come together as an industry and learn our trade as one. In those days, state RTO laws were few. A federal law was only a dream, but he and the other founders of this new trade association called APRO knew that if we were to survive we could only do so as one unified voice. On that day in 1981 it was his voice that beckoned to me.

A few years later, I opened my first store. Not long after we joined APRO, I soon found myself immersed in RTO politics in Ohio and pursuing a state law. As I became more involved, something magical happened. I became aware that for me to thrive in my new business, it meant opening my mind to new ideas. It became clear to me that there were many people with different viewpoints who worked in this industry. As I spent more time with other industry leaders, I realized that only by having an open mind would my business grow. One idea that was passed on to me from Ed was, “we always need to stick together.”

As we fast-forward through the years, I can look back and clearly define the reasons that I have been able to maintain a high level of success in RTO. They all point toward APRO membership. Today I can break those reasons into three

categories: APRO staff, APRO vendors and APRO members.

I use my APRO membership to its fullest extent. As I have served as a director on the APRO board, chaired committees, spoken at meetings, or traveled far and near for some industry project, I have learned that the primary value has come through my involvement. Had I never joined, I would have never experienced the loving devotion of the APRO staff. I would have never enjoyed the learning process of how to plan a meeting or how to organize a grassroots effort for legislative and public relations purposes. I could never have shared the industry vision of Bill Keese, Ed Winn and the eight APRO staff members who give far more of themselves than they are required.

Over the years I have come to know every member of the vendor community that serves RTO. These people always provide a fountain of knowledge that has helped me run a better business each and every year. It has become more than clear that their choice in supporting our industry is far more than selling product. There is no question that they give of themselves to offer RTO dealers every chance to succeed. There is a strong bond that exists between us.

There is not nearly enough room to list the names of the men and women who have made a positive impact on me. From the founding fathers to the newest guys on the block who have opened their first store, I can better list you as family. The details of your professional lives that you have shared with me have made me a far better person today as compared to a long time ago when I first rented a television in 1981. The best thing a family does is share and that is what we do as APRO members. I could never give back enough to repay my gains from just belonging to APRO and staying involved. You could “triple my dues” and it would never repay what I have learned from being involved. You can have this, as well. You don’t have to write another check. Instead, you just need to be involved. ■

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By ERNIE LEWALLEN
 APRO board member