

Note to Self: Reflecting on 25 Years

By Polly Shea
Editor/Publisher

When I took over publication of the *Electrical Rebuilder's Exchange* in January 1992, I couldn't think past that first issue, much less 300 more. Of the 400 issues that have rolled off the press since the paper's inception, 300 bear my mark. It's second nature now, but I felt completely overwhelmed at the time.

Everybody loved Ralph. He had poise and charm, and a way with words. He was a seasoned newspaperman when he started the *Exchange*. I, on the other hand, had a middle management background in layout, design, advertising, print production, photography, typesetting—and a touch of trade show experience. Stepping up to run the paper wasn't the problem. Not knowing the industry was. Yet we were to be the champions of the little guy.

Those first phone calls to rebuilders and suppliers necessitated a full five minutes each of prayerful meditation before picking up the phone to get my first issue together. And the next trade show was just a handful of months away. Meeting Jim Maxwell, Dick Vensel, Ron Carlson, Jim Banner and many others face-to-face took a lot of the fear out of my new responsibilities. I had previously met the Grubes at Ralph's funeral. Their warmth and sincerity comforted me considerably. "But



Exchange founders Margaret and Ralph Albares in 1987.



Editor/Publisher Polly Shea and Associate Editor Traci Matt earlier this year.

these are all Midwesterners," I thought.

To my pleasant surprise, I found, for the most part, the same genuineness throughout the industry. Sal Saccullo and Bob Wagner instantly felt like old friends. I was falling in love with the industry.

Having already done time in the corporate world and feeling sorely disillusioned, the opportunity to work with small businesses was a real treat that later became a passion. The people in the electrical rebuilding industry have always been the impetus to keep me

going. Publishing took second place. That isn't to say there aren't some real characters out there, but the overwhelming support of the majority helped keep me focused. And still does.

The paper went through some changes after I bought it. Although Ralph initiated the first January "Buyer's Guide," over the years I took it to a whole new level. At its peak we listed 175 suppliers for the convenience of our readers. Consequently, I became an expert in information gathering and hand-holding. The spring "All New Review," where we publish everything new in the industry from parts to products to services, debuted in 1993.

Our circulation grew considerably in the 90s as did the size and content of the paper. Our largest issue was published in May 1997, was 40 pages and included 50 advertisers. But that was before the "fall." Just as Rob Buksar predicted, our international trade agreements would take a toll.

Faithful writers have been the backbone of the paper over the years. Their dedication and commitment to the industry is unparalleled. Many times they burned the midnight oil to get their copy in on time. And before we were able to post these articles online, they were re-printed at the end of each calendar year in booklet form beginning with 1993. We boast two famous writers: Joe Davis of the automotive electrical rebuilding industry and Dan Marinucci of the automotive aftermarket.

Featuring rebuilding shops throughout the years has been a joy. It's a window into someone's business and their life that we wouldn't otherwise get a glimpse of; their ingenuity, tenacity, and heart. The occasional new supplier is fea-

ture material as well, just to help them with a leg up.

At different junctures we would offer a new service and see if it would stick. In October 1995 we announced a tech support line which had a short life of about six months. Rebuilders wanted a free service and we didn't have deep enough pockets to fund it. Along the way, the trusty ERE Advisors would answer questions, make suggestions and help keep me on the beam.

Yet another first was the formulation of annual planning meetings to hammer out details for the then E+ Trade Show. Ft. Worth, Texas was the site of the first meeting in 1998. Over 20 rebuilders and suppliers attended and in eight hours we had a program everyone was proud of. With only one exception, 19 to 22 members of the industry have attended each of our 10 meetings thus far, the most notable meetings being the first one, the Niagara Falls meeting held in Chicago with the Canadians, and the most recent meeting to plan the Grand Rapids event. The training offered there was especially well-balanced and there was a lot of it.

Our only collaboration, the 2000 show in Niagara Falls, Canada with the now-defunct A.E.R.A.C., was one for the record books. Eighty-some suppliers exhibited to a record crowd of Canadians and Americans. The front page of the show issue of the *Exchange* was by far the most handsome and exciting ever produced, and featured both country's flags and the falls.

But our biggest contribution to the industry has been the all-electrical trade association. After ten years of resisting pleas from rebuilders and suppliers alike, I finally felt the time was right. In

November of 2001 I announced the formation of the association. Six months and several hundred charter members later, five of the industry's largest suppliers approached me to offer their support. Eighteen months later I gave the private organization, the Electrical Rebuilder's Association, to a newly formed non-profit group of industry members.

And that's how I've tried to run this little business for the last 16½ years. Making a lot of money was never the goal — being of service was. We held our ad rates for many years at a time and then only increased them after careful consideration of what the smaller suppliers could pay. The annual "Buyer's Guide" and "All New Review" listings were brought to the reader at considerable time and expense to us, but free for the supplier. Any charges for things like tech booklets merely covered our costs.

Consideration of the rebuilder's cost to attend the trade show was always paramount. I negotiated with hotels until my eyes bled for the lowest room rates possible. The show moved around North America to make it available to rebuilders who could not travel to it, when a stationary event would have been infinitely easier and less expensive.

You have to give it away to keep it. And keep it I have! I don't live in a new house or drive a new car, but I've made real and lasting friendships with many people in this industry. "Your best interests at heart" is not just our slogan. I have lived it. At times it's been difficult when my intentions have been questioned. At other times I've had more fun than anyone in business could hope for.

My job is to do what I believe is the next right thing, God's job is all the rest.

The return on my investment is immeasurable. Thank you for your investment in me.

"Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you"
Luke 6:38.