An Interview with Dale Howes

CONSISTENT GROWTH THROUGH MENTORING SUCCESSFUL CAREERS

Now operating from three locations in Langley and West Kelowna, British Columbia, and Airdrie, Alberta, Traveland RV Supercentre, Tiffin’s largest Canadian dealer, has 240 employees, each with special skills that have built a company emphasizing customer satisfaction and service.

“Our excellent service makes satisfied owners who keep coming back to upgrade or buy their second or third RV from us. We find ourselves selling RV’s across multiple generations,” laughed Dale Howes, owner and CEO. “Often I see the grandchildren of previous customers coming in to buy their first RV.” Traveland’s sales continue to grow year over year as a result of referrals from satisfied customers.

To many of the employees, Dale Howes, 62, is a mentor, father figure, encourager, and teacher. “Building strong relationships in your own family, with your fellow employees, with your managers, with your customers—that’s how you succeed,” Dale emphasized. “The relationships are based on unselfish caring and integrity. That’s how a company becomes a family. We help each other learn to do our jobs, be the best that we can be, and build careers.”

Dale’s father emigrated to Saskatchewan from England. “The oldest child inherited everything in that culture,” Dale said. “My father was not the oldest so he decided to leave England and come to Canada.”

Dale’s father, Charles Wesley Howes (b. 1899) was a good mechanic who ran a local service station and a farmer. He homesteaded a quarter section of land (160 acres) and raised wheat. “My father ran the farm where I was born in 1954. I began driving the wheat truck when I was 11 years old,” Dale remembered vividly. “Dad put a box behind my back to push me forward enough to reach the pedals.”

In 1966 Dale’s father decided to move his family to Abbotsford, British Columbia where he opened a Phillips 66 service station. “I worked in the station as a teenager although I was not legally old enough to pump gas,” Dale explained. “My job was changing tires. I ran the front end of the station from 3 till 8 p.m. when dad would come back and close up.

“Young kids today are not brought up and expected to have a job after school or on the weekends,” he continued. “They don’t know what they like or what they might be good at doing. They don’t get the opportunity to learn business skills or how to deal with people. Learning new skills is something you should get excited about. It was something we looked forward to.”

After graduating from high school in 1972, Dale took a job driving a forklift truck for a company. “I had an accident and cracked a bone in my foot,” he said. “While I was off from work, I visited my cousin who was the sales manager in an RV dealership. The phone was ringing in the middle of the oil embargo and fuel was scarce in some areas, but Dale’s cousin told him that the founder of Winnebago (John K. Hanson) said, “You can’t take beer and weekends away from the American people.”

“We decided Canadians wouldn’t give them up either,” he smiled. “I sold RVs for four more years. Being an RV salesman was so much fun I couldn’t believe it was a real job!”

An unexpected opportunity developed in 1977 while Dale was dealing with a problem at his cousin’s store. Aware of Dale’s consternation, a Triple-E manufacturer’s rep who was on-site that day suggested there was an RV dealership down the street that was for sale. “After investi-
gating the business opportunity, another salesperson, Gordon Bird, and I each borrowed $10,000 and bought it,” Dale related. “It was April 26, 1977. On April 25, I had no intention of buying a business. By May 1, 1977 we were officially open for business. It is amazing. Throughout my entire business career, things have happened unexpectedly—just a natural set of circumstances. Within 3 months we had proved to the bank that we were capable of running a business and they advanced us the money to continue to operate.”

The year also was marked by another major event in Dale’s life. Sweethearts since high school days, he and Jeanette were married on Aug 20, 1977. This year both Dale and Jeanette and Traveland RV are celebrating their 40th anniversary.

“We were competing with two other RV sales companies when we started Traveland RV,” Dale continued. “By 1979 we had become the largest Travelaire dealer in Canada and were doing well enough to buy out Frank Dunn Sales, one of the competing stores in Burnaby.

“The former owner’s son came with the store,” Dale joked. “Milfred Abrams was asked to stay for a short time to assist in the transition to new ownership. We are blessed and fortunate that he agreed to stay on. He is one of our two general sales managers. Another interesting situation happened in the spring of 1978. A car salesman and friend of mine asked me to hire his son to wash travel trailers. Bill Verhagen came to work and 39 years later is our service manager. Milfred and Bill have been and continue to be crucial to the success of Traveland RV.”

In the next few years Dale began to develop a management plan for hiring new employees. “We like to hire younger people who have a family, want a career, have responsibilities and commitments,” he said. “It is a model that works. Find a younger gal or guy, start them in one of the jobs in the parts department. When they master two or three positions in parts, we offer them an entry level job in sales. Of course, there is plenty of room for growth in sales. When an applicant has more experience, I look for a little more advanced position. I hired a service advisor last week who had worked nine years for Home Depot. After camping with friends and learning more about the RV industry, he decided he wanted a career in this business.”

As the 1980 decade began, Traveland was struggling with a financial crisis that RV dealerships all across the U.S. and Canada were facing. “In 1981 the interest rate soared to 20 percent and nearly wrecked us all,” Dale began. “We were really ‘out of business’ but we didn’t tell anyone. We had just bought a new location in Abbotsford and were faced with a huge mortgage when the bank called our note. In fact, the Bank of British Columbia called everyone’s note in the RV business. We had not missed a payment.”

Ironically, the bank appointed Dale to begin selling all of his inventory on a reducing line of credit basis. No new inventory! Because of his knowledge and success in the RV business, the bank, instead of bringing in an outside company, asked Dale to liquidate the bank’s position with Traveland RV. In 1986 the Bank of British Columbia filed for bankruptcy. Leading up to that moment, the RV business was an easy industry to go after because it would affect the least number of people and raise the most cash.

“We lost money for nine months,” Dale continued. “As partners, Gordon and I took no paycheck at all. Bill Verhagen and Milfred Abrams stayed, taking only 50 percent of their salaries. The crunch hit in August 1981. We were in survival mode all of 1982, with just five new travel trailers to sell.”

In the Fall of 1982, the Travelaire sales manager called to ask how the company was doing. “We haven’t lost our property yet,” Dale said. “We may try to sell used cars.”

To his surprise, the sales manager offered to ship trailers on credit and allow selected dealers to pay when sold—no interest. “All of a sudden things changed for us,” Dale said. “Our competitors did not get this offer and it was pivotal in turning us around. A mining company needed 10 trailers to house miners as they opened up a new mining operation. We sold 10 more and made enough money to get us through the 1983 winter and into 1984.

“Toward the end of 1985, we were operating two stores.” Dale said. “We were consolidating the two stores into the Langley location when we found five acres strategically located on the Langley By-Pass.

“We met with the three partners who owned the five acres,” Dale said. “I told them we would like to buy the land but we had no cash but we did have equity in the Abbotsford property. One of the partners asked me to stay as the meeting broke up. To my surprise he said, ‘When could you move in?’ I said, Soon. ‘If you could make the payments on my mortgage, I will personally finance you for the difference,’ he replied. As I said earlier, things have happened unexpectedly in my career—this time two sets of circumstances just naturally intersecting and coming together.”

In January 1986 Dale and Gordon opened the dealership on the Langley By-Pass with offices in a double-wide trailer. We sold the Abbotsford land a year later which qualified us to take over the bank’s first mortgage on the five acres. Our ‘benefactor’ financed us on a second mortgage to cover the difference in the appraised price and the bank’s loan. It was a roller coaster, but we pulled it off.”

To expand their brands, the partners took on Triple-E, a Canadian manufacturer, quickly making Traveland a viable Class A motorhome dealership. Perhaps not realizing that Triple-E and Travelaire jealously regarded Traveland RV as the prime dealership in the Vancouver area, Dale negotiated to take on Vanguard motorhomes and trailers. In a squeeze play, Traveland lost both Triple-E and Travelaire but took on all of Vanguard’s brands for motorhomes and travel trailers, getting an ample inventory that pushed their annual sales numbers into the right direction.

Realizing the need for an upscale new facility, and better approaches to effective management, Dale and Gordon in 1992 contacted Bill Gorman of Virginia Beach, a highly respected business advisor to RV dealerships. Gorman formed focus groups usually limited to 15 dealers who were not in direct competition with each other.

“Bill came to our location in Langley to evaluate our business and select a focus group for us to join,” Dale explained. “After he reviewed the service facility, he shocked me with a terse report: ‘You have outsold your costs and covered your weaknesses. Your fixed operations do not measure up to your sales volume.’”

Dale and Gordon added an IDS computer system to manage all of the dealership’s departments and asked Gorman to design a modern superstore. Construction began in early 1994 and Traveland RV moved on October 31 into a modern facility that provided a new work flow in sales, service, and parts.

“We were now able to provide better direction to customers from the moment they arrive, park, and begin walking through our store,” Dale noted. “The flow brings everyone into a general reception area. A right turn takes you to the parts and accessories store and our service advisors. A left turn takes the RVer into our indoor showroom and sales center. We zero in on helping the customer immediately, determining interests and needs, and efficiently serving him or her.”

Traveland RV joined a focus group in which key owners and managers come together periodically to address business problems, find solutions, and share ideas that are mutually helpful to all of the members. One member may have already experienced and solved a problem that another is dealing with for the first time.

“The focus group has been the major influence on my business career,” Dale acknowledged. “I quickly realized that I needed to do business with manufacturers who owned and controlled their own businesses and did not have to consult a board of directors to make strategic decisions. Twenty years ago several companies fit that profile, but that is no longer
true. Today that number has been reduced to two or three.”

In 2012 Dale bought out his long-time partner Gordon Bird and began thinking about building a family management team and a viable succession plan. Dale and Jeanette have three sons: Shaun, 35; Brad, 33; and Kris, 31.

“I am very fortunate that our three boys have grown up in the business and decided that Traveland is where they want to build their careers,” Dale said. “Because I enjoy working with them, I don’t want to retire. I have decided when you don’t have to come to work, it is more fun to come to work. I love being a mentor to Shaun, Brad, and Kris and so many other talented young people who are trained or are being trained in all facets of this business.

“We have a sub-group to the focus group—young people who are learning the business from their perspectives. They will one day operate our dealerships,” Dale said. “As they rotate in and out of the departments of their companies, they are adding depth to their management experience that they share with each other.”

Dale’s sons meet his criteria for the type of employee he wants to hire: young, motivated, have a family, and career minded. Kris and his wife, Chalie, have three children: Tristan, 5; Charles Wesley Howes II, 3; and Evelyn, 1. Brad and his wife, Carly, have a little girl, Misa, 2. Shaun is married to Priscilla and they have three children: Camryn, 12; Vienna, 9; and Pax, 6.

Like all trainees, Shaun began his career washing RVs during holidays and throughout the summers. “When I finished high school, I started as a forklift yard man, but often gravitated to the service department to help the techs. Two years later I moved into tent trailer sales. Every morning we swept out all of the trailers. Keeping them clean makes a big difference in moving the inventory.”

“Ron Livingston, who is now 86 and still working here, taught all three of us how to sell tent trailers,” Shaun continued. “We soon moved up to travel trailers and then to motorhome overflow. In 2009, I began a four-year term in sales management approving deals.”

Shaun found his niche in special projects. “When we heard in 2013 that Art Pike’s motorhome store in West Kelowna was for sale, we made calls to determine if we could secure product lines with Tiffin, Open Range, and Prime Time. With those assurances, Shaun noted, “we made an offer and bought the store. I spent a lot of time getting that store up and running. Then in May 2016 we acquired the store in Airdrie, Alberta. I spent the spring and summer setting up the departments in that store.”

Perhaps falling under the influence of the Old West, Shaun competes in cutting horse competitions. He also enjoys hunting, fishing, and water and snow skiing. “We grew up on a small farm where I spent five years in 4-H and beef production,” Shaun said. “I started riding horses and got to know Keith Smith who taught me how to identify a good horse. Dad enjoys riding, too, and we occasionally get to ride together.”

After dating her in high school, Shaun married Priscilla Krueger whose family moved to British Columbia from Brazil in 1998. Priscilla’s grandparents were dairy farmers in Russia before they emigrated to Brazil. Her father, Harry, is a cabinet designer and her mom, Monica, is the manager of Traveland RV Rentals, a Howes company that rents RVs to anyone looking to explore Canada or the US from May to mid-October.

Kris’s earliest memory is his dad trying to make a sale while he was jumping up and down on the RV’s bed. “My first job was washing trailers,” Kris said. “I began working counter sales in the parts department when I was 15. Then I worked two years selling tent trailers and a year in towables and fifth wheels.”

Kris moved to Houston in 2006 to do an internship at Holiday World of Houston. “Michael Peay, who is in Dad’s focus group, mentored me for a year,” he explained. “I worked two months in each department. It was a big eye opener to me that Michael and Dad were both successful but they did a lot of things very differently. Holiday World’s general manager, Charlie Power, introduced me to his daughter, Chalie, and I married her! Friends tease me about having such a successful year in Houston. Michael still mentors me today and Charlie is now a partner with Paul Everett. Here in Langley I spend most of my time in finance and sales, but sales is really my ‘cup of tea.’

“Our key management people rotate in and out of Airdrie and West Kelowna in two-day stents to infuse our management style, methods, and philosophy into those stores,” Kris continued. “In studying our marketplace, we see our generation moving toward smaller RVs with higher technology. The American influence got us into selling big units,” he smiled. “Now we are trending back to smaller. From January to August in the Airdrie store, we sold a lot of Airstreams and the most popular size is the 16-footer. A large percentage were bought by 30 to 35-year-olds.”

Kris is a golfer and likes to spend time on the links with Dale whenever they both can find the time.

Following his dad’s plan for getting into the business, Brad also washed travel trailers during the four summers of his high school years. “After I finished high school in 2002, I took a different ‘career’ path at Traveland and started in shipping and receiving. The parts department didn’t have any openings,” Brad joked. “I did eventually move into parts where I had two jobs: running parts and working the front counter. After you have been in the parts department for a couple of years, you move into doing unit demonstrations for new owners. Mr. Livingston also taught me how to sell tent trailers, and then travel trailers. He was and still is a good mentor to all three of us.”

In 2004 Brad decided to take a year’s sabbatical to go backpacking through Southeast Asia which included Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, and Australia. He met Carly, an Australian, while backpacking in Thailand and persuaded her to visit Canada for backpacking in the Rockies. “We went to Australia in 2008 on a Jayco dealer trip,” Brad said. “I decided to stay in Australia to attend college and earned bachelor’s degrees in information technology and business management. We moved to B.C. two years ago. I now head up our IT department and handle most of our responsibilities in human resources. Monitoring all of the HR requirements that come out of Canada’s legislative bodies is a job by itself. We now have employment agreements and extended health benefits.”

Having expressed no interest in retiring, I asked Dale about his plans for the future—or at least for the next five years. “I would love to expand here in Langley with a new location and a physical store that is designed for the way we do business,” he began. “We long ago outgrew the footprint of this five-acre property. Finding land that does not add an exorbitant amount of overhead will be a problem.

“It is a great time to expand. We have a very capable management team, most of whom are in their thirties, which will be a major factor in successful growth,” Dale continued. “We have several mentors like Bill Verhagen, Milfred Abrams, and Chris Carter who will continue to share their knowledge and experience. All of our sales team are 35 and under, including Cam Scouten, one of our two sales managers.

“My health is great. Exercise? No, I don’t do that. Exercise wears out your body,” he joked, perhaps seriously I thought. “Are there any new stores to buy? Can we successfully run this business with the government constantly in our face creating new obstacles?”

“Social media and high tech will be the biggest factors in changing RVing in the next ten years. By 2027 the way we do business will be very different,” Dale predicted. “But with our young and intelligent leadership and team, I think we are ready for the challenge.”

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