

## The Hardware Conference Has Been Building Industry Relationships By Providing Forum for 20 Years

**W**hat started out as a small, regional gathering of dealers buying from the same co-op has turned into an event that brings the industry together. The 2008 Hardware Conference, which took place in Marco Island, Fla., from September 5-7, celebrated 20 years of building relationships between industry retailers, manufacturers and wholesalers.

The Hardware Conference now attracts hardware store owners from all over the United States, and even some from Canada. Tom and Dale Chasteen, the Conference directors, say they hope to eventually attract at least one hardware store owner from every state in the U.S.

Tom Chasteen thanked each one of the attending wholesalers—Do it Best, Orgill, True Value and Ace Hardware—for their continued support of The Hardware Conference over the years and for sponsoring their annual dealer luncheons each year.

Each of the co-ops nominated a dealer to receive the annual Beacon Award for their commitment to the industry and their communities. This year's winners included Lester Sardinha in Naranja, Fla., from True Value; Glenn Frith in Madison, Fla., from Do it Best; while Ace recognized Tom Chasteen as its Beacon Award winner for his efforts within the hardware industry and his commitment to The Hardware Conference for the past 20 years. The three co-ops also made \$500 donations in these retailers' names to the North American Retail Hardware Association's (NRHA) scholarship fund.

Larry Keller, who recently retired from Minwax, was presented a Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his career in the hardware industry.

During Friday night's dinner, Chasteen recapped how The Hardware Conference got its start 20 years ago, recognizing Dan Hitchcock and Paul Weintraub as the other two dealers who helped design the format and pick Marco Island as the area to hold The Conference.

Chasteen laughed as he told the audience about their first meeting with several

of the hotels. "None of the sales managers took us very seriously. Obviously, none of us knew a thing about meeting planning, but eventually we got past that issue. Now we typically book 750 to 900 room nights each year and they all want to talk to us," he said.

He thanked NRHA for its continued support and marquee sponsorship of the Conference, and he recognized John Hammond, who Chasteen called a personal friend. Hammond retired in July as managing director of NRHA after 33 years of service, and he was succeeded by Bill Lee, who was also in attendance at the Conference.

Lee awarded three \$1,000 NRHA scholarships to Brent Banner of Avery True Value in Newland, N.C.; Evan Waksler of Morton's Ace Hardware in Port Charlotte, Fla., and Larry Williams III of Spencer's Hardware in Morton, N.C. Retailers who are interested in more information about the NRHA scholarship program can contact Patty Bowman at 800-282-1642.

A new feature of The Hardware Conference this year was the New & Innovative Item Area, which was sponsored by Eazypower. A total of 52 new items were displayed in this area and plans are to expand it next year. Chasteen commented that dealers are always interested in what's new on the market and this area gives them the opportunity to preview these items before they attend their wholesaler buying shows in the fall.

The two open dialogue sessions gave attendees the opportunity to share ideas and observations or ask questions about industry issues. This year most of the discussion centered on increases in fixed costs, such as raw materials, fuel surcharges, freight, insurance, utilities and taxes, all issues that affect the profitability of the whole channel. Many attendees expressed the concern that the industry is just seeing the beginning of a trend and there are more price increases yet to come.



Hardware retailers and manufacturers from around the country shared ideas during the open dialogue session at the 20th annual Hardware Conference in Marco Island, Fla.

The U.S. dollar's depleted value compared to the yen and euro continues to impact the cost of imported merchandise. Dealers and vendors discussed how these price increases are affecting their purchases for the coming year. They also expressed concerns of a slowing economy and the need to reduce inventory levels, which will eventually impact service levels. Both the vendors and dealers expressed their continued concerns about eroding margins and gross profit dollars over the past five years.

As is tradition, the vendors donated their merchandise so it could be auctioned off to attending dealers with all proceeds given to the Miami Children's Hospital Foundation. Chasteen said this year's auction raised nearly \$26,000, which brings the total the Conference has raised over 20 years to more than \$600,000.

Bringing the event to a close, Chasteen said, "The success of The Hardware Conference is not the event itself, but the people and companies that attend and support The Conference each year. It truly is a place where relationships are formed."

Next year's Hardware Conference is set for September 9-13 in Marco Island. For more information, call Tom or Dale Chasteen at 305-853-0049 or visit [www.thehardwareconference.com](http://www.thehardwareconference.com). ─