

# Crossing Generations

## George's Tool Rental, the 26-year-old Hatfield firm, passed hands to a new owner: The old owner's son-in-law.

By John Anastasi

Phil Leber had always wanted to run his own business.

So, in 1970, he scraped together \$28,000 and purchased George's Tool Rental from the original owner — Hatfield's George Laepple.

"I was actually \$250 short of the settlement," said Leber, who added that the cost included a house next door. "I had some vacation pay coming from my previous job, so I had them hold the check until I got it. It was very scary."

The father of five was leaving a firm where he had considerable seniority for the equipment rental business at a time when the concept was relatively new.

In 1970, George's Tool Rental was a 900-square-foot store on Bethlehem Pike that offered a rental selection of about 150 pieces of equipment. Leber, who ran the business with his wife, Bertha, used a cigar box as a cash register and their kitchen table as his office.

Now retired, Leber, 82, said he never would have imagined then that the Hatfield location would grow to 22,000 square feet, the business would carry well over 1,000 items and it would open locations in the Danboro section of Plumstead, in 1997, and in Doylestown, in 2004.

The business that began with two people — Phil and Bertha Leber — now employs close to 30 full-time staffers for most of the year and about 40 during the summer.

But one of the things Leber seems happiest about is that the business is still in the family.

"I wanted it to succeed as a family business," he said.

That meant figuring out how to transfer ownership to one or more of his children when he decided it was time to retire.



In 2003, he called the Delaware Valley Family Business Center, a West Rockhill-based management consulting firm that specializes in helping family businesses overcome problems and plan for the future.

"Most don't make it from one generation to the next," said Henry Landes, who founded the business center in 1989 and helped the Leber family through the process.

Keeping the lines of communication open during family planning meetings is important, Landes said.

"In discussions of who should be an owner, it is hard to tell the truth about it. And we helped them to speak the truth about whether they wanted to and who was capable of doing it," Landes said. "They fear that they are going to blow up the family or ruin the business. But by not talking, they might do both."

Al Wismer, who married Leber's daughter Marty, managed George's Tool Rental for about 15 years. Originally, Leber envisioned



Wismer and his wife running the business alongside another son-in-law and his wife. But while discussing the business' future, it became clear that the second son-in-law preferred to remain the company's mechanic, instead.

"One thing he stressed was that in a family business, it does not matter if you're born into it or married into it," Wismer said. "You still have a choice (to be part of it)."

There are financial considerations as well, since part of the challenge is ensuring that retiring owners get what they need to cover their expenses. Marty Wismer said the planning led to some "awkward," but necessary, conversations.

Leber is happy about the way everything turned out.

Now he splits his time between his house in the mountains and the home next door to the Hatfield location. He and Marty belong to a bowling league and he spends time hunting and visiting his wife, who has Alzheimer's disease and lives in a nursing home.

Meanwhile Al Wismer says the company is keeping busy. The Plumstead and Doylestown locations include showrooms for Good Times Rental, an arm of the business that provides party supplies and planning services. Between the two related operations, GTR rents everything from bolt cutters and backhoes to moon-bounces and karaoke machines.

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