

# Meet 2020 RVDA Chairman Ron

By Mary Anne Shreve

**Ron Shepherd** exchanged the automotive industry for the RV industry in 1990 when he became partners with an experienced RV dealer. The two grew their dealership from a mom-and-pop operation with \$2 million in annual sales to one of Tulsa's premier dealerships. Shepherd eventually left to set up his own dealership, Camperland of Oklahoma in Tulsa, which celebrated its 15th birthday this year. Along the way, he helped found the Oklahoma Recreational Vehicle Association, serving as its president. In addition to serving on RVDA's board of directors, he has chaired the Convention/Expo Committee.

## Q Describe Camperland of Oklahoma's customer demographics.

**A** It was predominantly boomers before, but now we're selling to a lot of younger families, in keeping with national statistics that show millennials are now the largest segment. A new trend we're seeing is boomers who are trading down and buying



2020 RVDA Chairman Ron Shepherd with receptionist Ana Carbajal

smaller units. We're not selling big motorized units – our focus is on towables – and people aged 35 to 55 are our biggest demographic group. Because of where we're located, another pretty good-sized segment for us is the pipeline people, welders and other folks being sent out to the oil fields in Montana, North Dakota, Texas, and Oklahoma.

## Q Are dealer inventories finally right sized or are things still shaking out?

**A** My sense is that it's very close to having gotten right sized. At Open House, I talked to friends who are still trying to get their inventory at the right place. This year has been very painful. It's been tough on all of us because margins have slipped as people try to right size their inventory. At my dealership, towables sell very well. Motorhomes go hot and cold.

## Q Has the industry made any headway with improving RECT (repair event cycle time)?

**A** We definitely need to stay on point with RECT. The work done by [former RVDA chair] Brian Wilkins moved the needle. Since then we've accomplished quite a bit, although it can feel like a snail's pace. I just talked to my

DMS provider, Lightspeed EVO, and they're working on it with RVDA and RVIA. We need to keep the customer's experience in the forefront, and RECT has helped us realize we haven't been focused on the customer the way we should have. My sons and their generation don't buy cars that break, and if they do break, they better be repaired fast. The problem is that our industry hasn't focused on that the way it should have until the RECT study came to be. Now, because of the study, I believe all players realize the importance of quality, warranty,



Vice president of fixed operations Thomas Shepherd



# on Shepherd

parts availability, and trained technicians, the four pillars we talk about for improving the customer experience.

**Q** How has the trade war with China affected you?

**A** It's been a big deal for the cost of units. Manufacturers prepared for the tariffs by marking up their products. I think we had four price increases in the past 12 months, and that was before the tariffs had even been enacted. It's not that they've gone up by huge numbers but, as an example, our best-selling trailer is the number one selling trailer in North America. We used to advertise it at \$12,995,

and now we're selling it for \$14,995 – an increase of \$2,000 in just 12 months. And the terms used to be \$99 a month, and we couldn't keep the units in stock. Today it's \$129 a month with 10 percent down. I definitely think that slows business down. The trade tariffs need to be fair to both sides, and I'm not sure it has been, so what are we to do?

**Q** What are some of your goals as 2019 chair?

**A** In addition to RECT, I intend to start an initiative to get more dealers involved with RVDA so they see what the association does for them. For instance, I would love to



Service writer Michael Williams



Service technician Paul Sherwin



Shepherd, lot crew Sotero Saucedo and Jaime Perez

figure out how to double convention attendance, because once you go, you see how valuable an experience it is. As convention committee chairman, I saw the importance of changing the speakers around so you don't have the same ones every year. We do a good job of bringing in new voices, but I still hear that complaint "It's always the same." It's not, and I want to get that message out.

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Service writer Michael Williams, service manager Rick Wilson, Shepherd, (title?) Gilbert Jacquez



Service technician Shane Seccombe

**Q** What kind of a year is 2020 going to be for the RV industry? Dealers?

**A** I'm hoping the election next year doesn't cause a hiccup in things. Our media partners have already told us we need to book our advertising time for next year because of the elections. And I know we're well past due for a correction in the economy. I just hope it's not too painful, because I think there are a lot of dealers who are overextended. You tend to spend too much in good times.

On the other hand, our industry is doing a lot of things right, like the go RVing campaign. We've definitely gotten across the idea that RVing is family oriented, and I think people are coming back to valuing family time. We've right sized our inventory, and manufac-

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Salesmen Eric Allen and Gary Burger, salesman Don Hafner, vice president of sales and marketing Brent Shepherd



Parts person Herb Taylor



F&I manager Joe Sexson

turers have right sized production. So 2020 should be another good year. It may not be a fantastic year, but I think it's possible we'll get a modest 5 percent increase in RV sales.

**Q** What's your succession plan?

**A** My three sons all grew up in the business. Philip is a

special-education teacher in St. Louis, and the other two work in the dealership and want to stay in it. The oldest, Thomas, is vice president of fixed operations, the entire back end. My middle son, Brent, is vice president of sales and marketing and the Internet. They've been through the Spader leadership program, which they just finished in March, and will go through another five-day Spader program, and then they will be in their own 20 Groups.

We have a road map for how they'll take over, thanks to a good friend of mine who's also a dealer. He started thinking about what to do with his dealership when he was 65. I saw him going through the planning process and started thinking, 'We need to start thinking about our own exit strategy.' I don't want to work forever, so we better start putting some plans in motion. The first thing I did was to ask them if they were even interested in taking over. And I've been to [Morgan Stanley certified financial planner] Brad Stanek's session on exit plans twice." ■



Managers Ed Fillinger, Tammy Randall, Joe Sexson, Shepherd, Brent Shepherd, Thomas Shepherd, Jeff Burger