

No longer Daddy's garage. Central's seven stores grew from humble beginnings; Mom named the company "Central" because the brothers first opened shop halfway between Halifax and Sydney.

HAVE YOU ever wandered around a hardware store with paint swatches and wondered how the almond semi-gloss, in particular, might appear in the absence of fluorescent lights?

Fortunately, what might be dubbed the "full spectrum" approach is offered at Central Home Improvement Warehouse in Stellarton, NS, where the artfully designed paint department features four large skylights. Assisted by Mother Nature and the Group of Seven-style expertise of staff, customers can choose, under natural light, a palette that best matches their decorating needs.

The customer-friendly paint section is among a host of features that recently garnered Central Stellarton the 2012 Outstanding Retailer Award (ORA) in the category of Large Surface Retailer in Canada.

Opened in 2011, the store is the newest of seven outlets in the province wholly owned and operated by local entrepreneur Steve Smith. The gleaming building with signature Central "warm red"—not orange—trim stands as the first Atlantic Canadian shop in its category to win the lofty prize awarded annually by Toronto-based Hardware Merchandising magazine.

No "employees"

"You'd better believe there was a lot of whooping and hollering when we got the news," recalls Cheryl VanVeld, a Stellarton staffer who has worked at Central for 18 years. "It was awesome to know that we'd competed against the biggest names in the industry and come out on top."

As for awesome, shoppers bedazzled by the store's dramatic skylights will be floored by a visit to the retailer's energy department. There, a display of wood-burning stoves throws righteous heat from a stack of seasoned firewood.

"My jaw dropped when I moved closer to a stove and realized it was burning real firewood," marvelled one customer while I was there—she had made a quick stop at the shop to price bath accessories for a future renovation project. "I was thinking it had to be some kind of trick or optical illusion. I was thoroughly impressed."



Ditto the ORA judges that granted Central Stellarton near perfect marks for appearance, inventory, marketing, community outreach and customer service. To be sure, I helped myself to a bag of fresh-made popcorn (a customer perk also available at Central outlets in Port Hawkesbury, Sydney, Antigonish, Inverness and Windsor, although not at the Guysborough store) as I headed out the door with a sack of potting soil for narcissus bulbs.

After a scenic drive up the highway, I find myself chatting with khakis-clad Steve Smith, 60, in his unassuming Antigonish office. There's a hockey stick in one corner, a mini-fridge in another; a Harley-Davidson wall clock tick-tocks the incorrect time. While addressing his company's landmark ORA accolade, I utter the word "employee." Steve leans forward, as if revealing a trade secret.

"There are no 'employees' at Central," he gently counters. "I have 'associates' because I consider every person at every store to be my equal—we're just doing different jobs."

Open for business—in the garage

Today a successful businessman with more than 600 associates, Steve has come a long way from his former life as a "frustrated accountant." In 1975, the 23-year-old, who was working full-time as an accountant, began selling wood stoves and building materials part-time with his brother Dan, 24—then a small-scale building contractor—from their father's garage.

An international oil embargo had prompted unprecedented lineups at gas pumps throughout North America, sending fuel prices through the roof. Mindful that people would be keen to cut

heating costs, Steve and Dan had answered an ad in *The Casket*, the community newspaper in Antigonish, that sought a dealer for wood stoves. The pair needed \$6,000 to buy stock.

“The banker knew our father, who was a science teacher at the high school,” Steve recalls. “So, Dad co-signed for the loan, and we opened for business in the garage.”

The brothers set a goal to sell 50 of the \$500 wood stoves in their first season. Bolstered by the support of their family, they sold more than 300 stoves, along with chimneys, stovepipes and other items. “I would attribute our success at that time to the fact that we were carrying some products that were new to the market; also, our competition in Antigonish was constantly out of stock, so we were able to find a niche,” says Steve.

With business on fire, Steve and Dan soon relocated to larger quarters, which enabled them to meet growing customer demand for stoves, lumber and building materials. The company was named “Central”—by their mother, Miriam—because Antigonish is halfway between Halifax and Sydney, NS.

Throughout the 1980s, Steve and Dan steadily expanded the Central brand. Dan moved on in 1992, and Steve has continued to build new stores and diversify holdings. He’s now the owner of The Central Group of Companies, which includes S & D Smith Central Supplies Ltd. and Atlantic Windows, which has manufacturing plants in Port Elgin, NB, and Amherst, NS.

Atlantic Windows’ products are sold at building supply stores throughout the Atlantic Region, and in Bermuda, “because our product is one of the few that meets the needs generated by Bermuda’s tough climate—corrosion and wind and hurricanes.”

All in the family—and families in the community

Both his parents have been directly involved with Central at some point—his mother, who worked as a secretary at St. Francis Xavier University, in Antigonish, with the accounting, and his father with personnel. His three children now work for the company—his daughter, Meghan, works part-time in one of the retail stores while attending St. FX; son Patrick goes to business college and works in sales at Atlantic Windows during the summer; and his eldest son, Adam, studies business at St. FX and runs Central’s construction division. (“Don’t forget my wife, Kathy,” says Steve. “She may not work there, but she’s kept my life together.”) For fun, Steve likes boating, snowmobiling, travelling with his family and riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle, but says he eschews golf and other typical corporate “dealmaking” pastimes because they take too much time away from his family.

While Steve declines to divulge sales figures, he allows that Central’s profits have been good. But he’s quick to note that his desire to deliver world-class merchandise and service to small communities has been the driving force behind his business decisions.

“With all the focus on 21st-century global markets, my philosophy might sound quaint,” he says. “But for me, it’s all about investing in the local community. I don’t care if you come to Central to buy a pound of nails or the materials to build an entire house, my mission is to be your partner in realizing your dream.”

Big box benefits with hometown warmth

Indeed, Steve’s enthusiasm builds as he describes his dedication to everyday people. Transfixed by his fervour, I soon feel as if I’m listening to a polished performer at a poetry slam.

“We hire local lawyers, local accountants, local truckers, local office supply companies,” he says, with a rhythmic boom box beat. “Central purchases 100 per cent of our premium and pressure-treated lumber from Nova Scotia woodlots. I have a personal relationship with our vendors. Sure, you pay a little bit more when you commit to local. But you’re also creating and maintaining local jobs that help your friends and neighbours thrive.”

Steve’s passion for people over profits has translated into a “Hell no, we won’t go” mentality among staff. “I love my job,” says Brian Burton, a Stellarton employee who has logged 20 years with the company. “With Steve leading by example, our mandate is to exceed expectations when helping people with their projects, large or small.” (Brian doesn’t mention it, but I understand that employees get birthdays off, with pay—which doesn’t hurt.)

Central has also emerged as a major contributor to non-profit groups, notably in the areas of education, health and youth.

“We have a state-of-the-art performance centre attached to our state-of-the art school, thanks to support from Central,” says Lloyd Hines, warden of the 5,000-resident municipality of Guysborough. “Steve’s always approachable when it comes to strengthening the community.”

A 1974 business graduate of St. FX, Steve donated \$1 million in 2007 that proved pivotal in raising additional funds for a new building at the school’s Coady International Institute, which trains grassroots leaders from all over the world.

Mirroring his Coady Institute contribution, sans flash or splash, Steve recently pledged \$1 million to the Halifax-based Daffodil Place building campaign. Scheduled to open in Halifax by 2015, Daffodil Place will provide meals, overnight accommodation and a variety of therapeutic programs for cancer patients and their families travelling more than 50 kilometres to undergo treatment in the city.

“One of our cabinet members approached him and he very quietly agreed to make a donation,” says Barbara Stead-Coyle, CEO of the Canadian Cancer Society, Nova Scotia Division. “Steve’s support will make a world of difference to cancer patients and their families.”

I can still hear the boom box beat—there’s definitely a rhythmic pattern to his life.

Just before I leave Antigonish, I purchase The Casket. Thumbing through the weekly, my eyes land on a large ad that reads: “Congratulations to Central Supplies Ltd. on being recognized as Canada’s Outstanding Retailer.”

I’d call that a full-circle moment for a man who, nearly 40 years ago, gamely answered an ad in the same paper to sell wood stoves.

Source: Saltscapes <https://www.saltscapes.com/people-culture-section/people-culture-category/2208-a-company-of-equals.html>