



DARREN BREEN/The News Tribune

Shawn Roehr, 32, co-owner and vice president of Arrow Lumber and Hardware, won the 2008 Young Retailer of the Year Award from the North American Retail Hardware Association. The store, which will soon expand to six locations, was conceived as a class project 13 years ago.

Class project now big business

Like a lot of high school kids, Shawn Roehr wanted to do well on his senior class assignment – develop a business plan for a fictitious business. But in the end, it was just another theoretical lesson some Puyallup High School teacher thought he should learn, right?

Wrong.

The fictitious business Roehr dreamed up in 1994? An independent hardware store and lumber yard. He wanted it to show up ahead of the competition in the phone book, so he called it Arrow.

Three years later, Arrow Lumber & Hardware opened in Eatonville – a few miles from where Roehr's dream store did.

Today, 13 years after Roehr turned in his class assignment, Arrow Lumber & Hardware has five stores in Western Washington, will open a sixth in Port Townsend next year and has started negotiations on a location for a seventh.

And that class-assignment-to-real-life-success



DAN VOELPEL

story won Shawn Roehr, Arrow's vice president and minority partner, the 2008 Young Retailer of the Year Award from the North American Retail Hardware Association.

Still, Roehr insists, his old assignment was just an assignment – promptly forgotten after he finished it. Despite the fact his presentation of it won first place

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ARROW LUMBER & HARDWARE

Founded: June 1997

Majority owner: Barney Wagner
Locations: Eatonville, Buckley, Orting, Port Orchard, Randle

Employees: 100

Mission statement: "To be the premier provider of quality building materials to the professional contractor and the do-it-yourself homeowner. Our hallmark is customer service based on honesty, integrity, and commitment."

Notable: By 2007 sales had grown to nine times the sales of Arrow's first full year of operation in 1998.

VOELPEL

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in a local competition, second place in a regional competition and 13th place in a national competition judged by bankers and business owners in 1994.

"To start a business is a huge, huge deal," Roehr said last week when I caught up with him at the Buckley Arrow. "You need a ton of capital investment. I was a high school student. I didn't have a lot of money to start my own lumber company."

But one man - Barney Wagner, who had the wherewithal to start a lumber company - didn't forget about Roehr's project.

Wagner once owned a share of the former Al Meier's Building Centers, which sold out to Lumberman's. He then went to work for Lumberman's as a regional operations executive. And he lived next door to Roehr.

Years ago, he noticed a 15-year-old Shawn Roehr building a backyard fence in a downpour and admired his work ethic. So he put a note in the kid's mailbox asking if he wanted a job at Lumberman's in Fife. Starting at the bottom. Emptying the garbage, cleaning toilets, changing prices in the computer. Eventually, maybe, loading lumber into customers' trucks.

By the time Roehr got his class business plan assignment, he had worked two years at Lumberman's and had moved into retail sales. And he sought some advice from Wagner on his business plan.

Then three years passed. By 1997 Wagner had an itch to own his own place again. He remembered Roehr's class assignment.

"In his DECA project," Wagner said, "he had everything from an advertising plan to how he'd raise the venture capital to the location where it was going to be. It was a very sound business plan."

So Wagner followed the plan.

He enlisted help from his old partner Al Meier, took Roehr with him, bought an old Eatonville lumberyard and renamed it Arrow.

Despite competition from big boxers Home Depot and Lowe's and notable independent chains, Gray Lumber and McLendon Hardware, Arrow continues to fly on the customer service strategy Roehr espoused in his plan 13 years ago.

"We're very much the old-fashioned lumber yard," Roehr said. "We really take care of people. We're lucky we have good people who are working here and care about the customers. We know a lot of them by name, and we do things that most of our competitors wouldn't think of doing."

The man who nominated Roehr as young retailer of the year, Mike Dawson, a vendor who works with Arrow, calls him "fair-minded."

"In today's 'dog-eat-dog' world, both Shawn and Barney strive to do what is right - for their customers, their employees, for their communities and in working with their partner suppliers," said Dawson, a manager for Horizon Distribution in Yakima.

Of course, over the years, the original business plan has evolved. Multiple stores. Going from four employees to nearly 100. Wagner wanted pianos in all the stores. The after-hours free Santa night for kids. Customer appreciation day. Donations to local food banks. Scholarships given in each Arrow community - to perhaps launch another student's business plan.

"Most of credit goes to Shawn," Wagner said. "He knows that 99 percent of success comes from hard work. ... Arrow Lumber wouldn't be where it is today if not for Shawn. Not even close."

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