

## FROM THE FIELD

## Paying it back

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In my October column, I wrote about my mentor Woolye M. Croker and how much he meant to me. Much of my success today is attributable to the lessons learned at his side during the time he spent with me. I regret not letting him know at the time how much I valued our relationship. When you are young, the concept of mortality is hard to comprehend. You believe the good times will last forever. Twenty years later, I understand that time is precious, especially time with someone who means so much to you.

While I missed my opportunity to thank Mr. Croker directly, I have chosen to express my gratitude in other ways. Over the years, I have tried to be as generous with my time with my younger employees as Mr. Croker was with his. In particular, I had a young man by the name of Joe come to work for me about five years ago. Joe applied for a job with me, but he had no experience. The last two years on his application were left blank. When I asked about this omission, he looked me in the eye and answered honestly that he had been in prison.

My first thought was to end the interview right then and there and thank Joe for his time. We work in multi-million-dollar homes and for many high-profile clients. I cannot take the risk of hiring a convicted felon. But something made me stop and reconsider. Over the years, I have honed the skill of reading people, and my BS detector is finely tuned. Something told me that this was a good kid who had made some bad decisions. It turned out I was right. Joe had paid dearly for his bad choices, paid his debt to society and was now looking for an honest job.

Joe started out as a truck driver and shop man. He quickly proved worthy of my trust. I enrolled him in the apprenticeship program that fall and he produced all As and Bs. He even won a \$1,000 scholarship from our local ACCA chapter.

Joe quickly became my right-hand man. When I dusted off the tools to go on a service call, which still happens now and then, I would take him with me. I would let him run the call, offering guidance and sharing my experience with him. He offered to run night or weekend emergency calls with me. I had heard this from others before, only to get excuses when I tried to take them up on the offer. Joe was always there, whenever I called, to help with these calls.

I knew I had done the right thing when I received a card from Joe's mother that first Christmas that read in part, "Thank you for giving Joseph the opportunity that has changed his life." I still keep that card in my desk to remind me that we all have the power to change people's lives. All it takes is a little bit of time invested. It also serves to remind me to listen to my heart. Your head can lie to you but your heart never does.

Last May, I had reconstructive surgery on my ankle. I put it off as long as I could as I knew it would be disruptive to my business. I'm the kind of person who

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believes the sun won't rise if I am not at the office at 5:45 a.m. every morning. I had no idea how I was going to be able to run my business and run our construction jobs while laid up.

I was out for a week after surgery, but I was not able to drive for close to a month. For three weeks, Joe got up at 3:30 a.m., drove 45 minutes to my house, drove me to the office and carried my laptop and any other belongings I needed. At 5 p.m., he did the reverse, through D.C. rush-hour traffic. I know he did not get home until well after 7 p.m.

We devised a way to run virtual service calls. Joe would show me video of the problem on his cell phone, and I would guide him through the solution with my leg up on my desk. Yes, he racked up plenty of OT, but overtime pay doesn't even begin to compensate him for this sacrifice. The reality is that I would not have been able to run my company without Joe.

Joe eventually graduated from the apprenticeship program and earned his journeyman's card. I attended his graduation last June and was just as proud of him as his family was. He had advanced to a junior technician position and was an indispensable part of my company. Joe left my company in December to move back to his hometown in Idaho. I was sorrier to lose him as a friend and family member than as an employee. I can only hope that he gained as much from our experience as I did.

## Part II

Recently, a friend asked me if I would be willing to spend a day with a young man looking to make a change in his life and possibly enter the trade. At 23 years of age, Dan from Philadelphia was looking to make a career choice. His current position did not offer a long-term career path. I offered to have him ride around with me for a day to see whether he would like the mechanical trade.

I was out of town the week before the scheduled date, and it hit 90 degrees the day before our ride-around. My phone was ringing nonstop, and I thought, "What an inopportune time to have scheduled this." But then I

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caught myself. I was thinking in a selfish manner. My mentor always had time for me. What was one day? Nothing at all, when put in that perspective.

I picked Dan up that morning, and we drove to our first call. My lead tech was on vacation, so we had to do a service call: There was no domestic hot water on a solar/radiant system we had just installed. The owner could not get a certificate of occupancy without hot water. We quickly found a loose wire connection and purged air out of the heat exchanger. We had a hot DHW tank in no time, and Dan saw firsthand the satisfaction of arriving at job where something was not working and leaving the job with everything in working order.

Our next stop was at ACCA headquarters in Arlington. Dan sat in on a meeting with Glenn Hourahan, senior vice president of ACCA. I also introduced Dan to Paul Stalknecht, CEO of ACCA, who offered him words of encouragement.

After a quick lunch, it was off to meet my crew installing a commercial steam boiler in a church in D.C. Dan successfully cut and threaded 3" black steel pipe and observed how a steam header is piped. I wanted him to understand the complexity of the project as well as to physically perform some of the work. I also wanted him to get the feel of working with my team. You have to be able to take some good-natured ribbing to work with my

crew, and Dan passed the test.

With cutting oil staining Dan's hands, it was off to the next project, a remodel project in Chevy Chase, Md. My lead tech, Milivoj, took the time to show Dan how to make a slip and drive joint on a duct run. Then he handed Dan his duct hammer, snips and hand seamers and let him make the next joint all by himself. With just a little guidance, Dan completed the task with all ten fingers still intact. I call that a success.

Then it was off to two new construction jobs, where we walked the jobs, met with the GCs and surveyed the work completed. By this time it was after 5 p.m., and I caught Dan yawning a few times. We had been going hard since 7:30 a.m., and it had been a long day. I wanted to show him a broad cross-section of what we do, as well as have him get some hands-on experience.

As we drove from job to job, I felt a wave of emotion sweep over me. It brought me back 20 years to a time when Mr. Croker and I spent Saturday mornings driving to jobs and talking. I heard myself using the same words Mr. Croker would say to me:

*"Don't tell me what you can't do; tell me what you can do."*

*"This is how we do the job — the right way. There is no other way."*

*"I don't want to hear excuses. I want to hear that the job is done."*

*"If it was easy, anyone could do it."*

*"If you are not going to give your best effort, don't even start."*

As I look around my company, I see gray hair and bald heads. We are not getting any younger. Who is going to do this work in five years? Ten years? We need young men like Dan and Joe in this trade. I need a handful in my company right now. All of us who have earned a good living from the mechanical trades have a duty to share our knowledge and experience with the next generation just getting started. Someone helped you when you were just getting started. Now it is time to pay it back. The funny thing is that I guarantee you will gain more from the experience than you give. I know I did. ●

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