

NEWS

The Whites just love service station business

By **Troy Bridgeman**



Jaime Hamilton and Dave White are the owners of College Auto Tech on Waterloo Avenue, a father-and-daughter team continuing a family tradition. - Troy Bridgeman, Special to the Mercury

GUELPH – It wasn't easy in 1967 for Dave White to convince his father to hire him full time at the family's garage in Fergus, but the stubborn high school graduate wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"Originally, I got accepted to Ryerson in Toronto to a three-year business program but that summer my dad needed a mechanic so I said, all right, I will apprentice with you," White said.

His father, Ross White, insisted that his son go to university as planned and forget about a career as an automotive mechanic.

"I said, no," White recalled. "I am going to work with you and he said I don't want you to work with me and we had this big battle."

His father even threatened not to pay him if he stayed.

"I said just give me room and board," White said. "How about that? Turns out I was a little more stubborn than he was."

His father eventually gave in and gave him the job.

"He shook his head a lot and every morning I just kept showing up and it worked out well," White said. "He taught me a lot and then when the time was right he moved on and I carried on."

The decision to follow in his father's footsteps set White on a journey that would span four generations.

He was born in Toronto, the only son of Ross and Marie White. He has an older sister Sheila and a younger sister Jo Ann.

In 1966 when he was 18 years old his family bought a service station in Fergus that became White's Esso.

"I had one year left in high school," he said. "I went to Grade 12 in Toronto and I went to Fergus high school for Grade 13."

When his father retired in 1975, White took over the business and the family home behind it.

He eventually sold White's Esso in 1996 but the new owner, who had apprenticed with White, kept the name and phone number.

In 1982, White opened College Avenue Esso at the corner of College Avenue and Edinburgh Road.

"It was just a little kiosk with a gas bar and a four-bay shop," he said. "I had two other gas bars in Guelph as well at the same time."

Wellington Esso was at the corner of Gordon and Wellington Streets and the other gas bar was at the corner of Speedvale Avenue and Woolwich Street.

"I didn't own them," White said. "I just ran them for Esso. I had them for, roughly, 10 years."

He and his wife Nancy have two daughters Kristi and Jaime.

Jaime Hamilton remembers working for her father when she was a teenager.

"I worked for Dad as a cashier in the gas bar at the College Avenue Esso and then I did one summer in the shop," she said. "I remember I would drive some of the customers home when I was in high school and they thought I was a baby. How is she driving us home? I was probably 16 at the time."

After high school, she went off to university and eventually started a family of her own with husband Mike Hamilton. They have two children Abbey, 13 and Liam, 10.

In 2002 White opened College Auto Tech on Waterloo Avenue and in 2012 Hamilton came to work with him again.

"It was kind of by circumstances this time," she said. "I was in sports medicine managing an office and I was looking for a change and Dad needed to hire a new office manager."

It had been more than 15 years since she worked for her father but she recognized many of the names on the customer list

"We've been in this so many years we're getting the next generation of customers," White said. "We have grandchildren of customers that we see now because they are old enough to drive."

He said customer loyalty and word of mouth have played a significant role in their continued success.

"It's the best advertisement you can get," White said. "That's for sure."

Hamilton is the third generation to join the family business and her son Liam is eager to carry the torch into the fourth.

"Dad started selling cars here the last couple years and my husband goes to the auction with him," she said. "Liam started cutting the lawn here last year and dad contracted him out for this summer. He's learned how to close up the shop and he loves it."

Everything is set in place to hand the business off to the next generation but White is in no hurry to retire.

"The beauty of being a small business is I don't have to turn in the key and walk away," he said. "I can come in at 11 and Jaime has agreed to always have a job for me if I need one. At this point I can't imagine never coming in here. I'd miss the people for one thing."



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