





RENT-TO-OWN FAMILIES

The Childers

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A ColorTyme couple answers the call of the Alaskan wild to lead the pack and soar to success

By Kristen Card

Last year, Mark Childers was faced with a choice: run with the dogs or soar with the eagles. Two years prior, Childers had thrown himself full-throttle into the sport of mushing and had managed to compete enough to be only one race and about 150 miles shy of qualifying for the Iditarod, the 1,000+-mile sled-dog team race across his home state of Alaska. But three years before, Childers and his wife Tracy, career ColorTymers, had earned for the first time (but not the last) the company's highest honor, the Franchisee of the Year Eagle Award.

"Essentially, I had to decide whether to race or run a business," Mark says. "Mushing is more like a lifestyle than a hobby, but our business is our passion."

His choice to soar paid off, big time. Not only did the couple win a second Eagle Award in January for their 2011 performance, but Tracy was clearly pleased with the career decision.

"When I began mushing, Tracy was 100 percent supportive," Mark attests. "She drove the dog truck to the checkpoints during competitions; she'd be out there in 20- or 30-below weather, waiting for me to come in. But when I said I wanted to refocus on the business, she was like, 'Fantastic!'"

Not a surprising reaction, since rent-to-own has been a key element in Mark and Tracy's relationship since he first met and hired her at the ColorTyme store he was managing in Bryan, Texas, in the late 1980s, having quit Texas A&M to pursue RTO.

"Our ColorTyme franchise had a fairly strict policy against dating, so after several

dates, I fired her," Mark chuckles. "I'm still paying for that one."

Tracy came around and the two wed while Mark moved up from multiple-store manager to district manager/troubleshooter to corporate field trainer. In 1993, the Childers met up with two-store franchisee Gary Hughes and joined him as a minority partner. Over the next 12 years, Childers and Hughes expanded their franchise to 33 stores; in 2005, they sold 27 of them to Rent-A-Center and parted ways.

Then, Mark retired—for about two weeks. Contending with a non-compete clause, he and Tracy headed north to Alaska (and Washington state), where they opened four stores within two years, two more since and still more to come.

"There's a ton of markets still available and every day we consider new offerings, new programs, new things to do," Mark says. "As long as it's fun, we're open to it. Even though we've been in this a long time, we are by no means through. We've just gotten going."

Recently, the couple's 24-year-old son, Josh, joined the family business, paying his dues in delivery and now working as an account manager. But it's gotta beat the time he spent helping Dad with kennel cleanup for 30 sled dogs!

"I think every parent who's built something would like to bring the children into it," Mark affirms. "Josh came into it on his own and he's just as excited about it as we are. That's the best part of working with family—sharing the passion." ✱

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