

TAKE A PEAK BEHIND THE CURTAIN AT THE MAN WHO,
FOR 30 YEARS, HAS BEEN RENT-TO-OWN'S VOICE OF REASON

BY KRISTEN CARD

The WIZARD of RTO

L

et's get one thing straight: Ed Winn would rather this article not exist. Yes, he's celebrating his 30th anniversary with the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations and the rent-to-own industry overall. Sure, he was one of the association's

founders and remains not only the organization's general counsel, but also the industry's conscience. And okay, he's sort of the walking, talking history of rent-to-own in America—and not a rose-colored retelling, either; Ed Winn III doesn't have a rose-colored bone in his body. What you get with Winn are the facts—good, bad, ugly or otherwise—typically laced with interesting insights and wry commentary.

Regardless, Winn doesn't like the idea of an article all about him. He much prefers to be the man behind the curtain, twisting knobs and pulling levers to make rent-to-own go. But the difference between Winn and L. Frank Baum's fictional Wizard of Oz is that Winn is the real thing—and what he does for the rent-to-own industry isn't just smoke, mirrors and distractingly giant fireballs. What Winn has done and continues to do isn't simply about making the industry look good; it's about making the industry be better.



Ed Winn III is a dichotomous dude. Growing up in the Southeast, he was reared a Southern gentleman and retains that air of gentility and elegance. Yet many colleagues demur from relating their most memorable moments with Winn, deeming them unfit to print. (*Ahem.*) Occasionally frugal to a fault, he has a knack for hunting down \$10 neckties, yet owns an absurdly extravagant home coffee maker. His vast vocabulary has APRO co-workers and members regularly referring to their dictionaries (“vituperous,” anyone?), yet he’s a master at telling it like it is.

One irrefutable consistency of Winn’s is his ability to succeed excessively. As a young man, Winn wanted to be a college professor like his father, who taught finance at Belmont University, Ole Miss and the University of South Carolina. Winn achieved that goal early on, becoming an award-winning law professor straight out of law school at The University of Texas at Austin. Feeling perhaps that he had peaked too early, Winn thought maybe he should test his mettle by becoming a practicing lawyer.

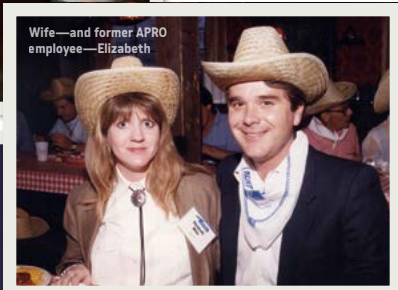
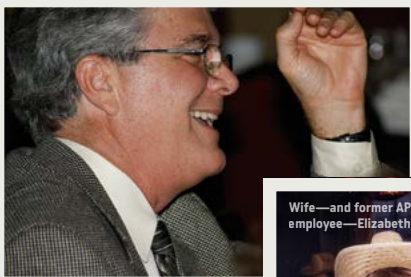
“I hung out a shingle to see whether I could hack it out in the real world,” Winn remembers. “The first year, I made \$3,000—not enough to live on, even in 1980 dollars. It got better, slowly.”

Winn’s entrée into rent-to-own began with a simple talk about government regulation to a group of rental dealers. Following Winn’s presentation, the dealers began to discuss the possibility of creating a trade association. Quickly realizing that an attorney was needed for such an undertaking, Winn was hired on the spot. It was a textbook case of right place, right time—from the industry’s viewpoint, anyway.

“My first encounters with the rent-to-own industry can be viewed as either a blessing or a curse,” Winn quips. “Most days, I see it as a blessing. The industry was a good client then and is one now. I doubt I would have made it without RTO.”

And vice versa. In APRO’s beginnings, Winn was involved in every element of the burgeoning new group—from drafting the association’s bylaws to acting as its *de*

WAY BACK WINN...



facto executive director for the first five years. Winn's clear-cut opinions and brass-tacks approach sometimes made for a bumpy ride.

"My style appealed to some, but definitely not to others," Winn recalls. "Especially others who deemed me too balanced and too ethical to be a truly effective rent-to-own lawyer. Most of those dealers are gone; I'm still here."

Winn has been there for the industry, both figuratively and literally—the number of association board or executive committee meetings he's missed over the past three decades can be counted on one hand. During the early years, he survived declaring a new "no drinking during the board meeting" rule ("I feared bloodshed might en-

to write and get paid for it. I may be the most grateful to rent-to-own for having let me develop my writing skills."

"Ed is an excellent writer," attests Neil Ferguson, APRO's publications editor and art director. "He loves words and has an eagle eye for split infinitives. Ed carefully reviews every issue of RTOHQ: *The Magazine* before it goes to press and calls me with copy corrections or changes. He can be brutally frank, grumbling, 'Second column, third paragraph, five lines down—that sentence makes no sense whatsoever, and we've got to fix it!' But I'm never bruised by his critiques—they're quite helpful!"

As for Winn's own material, he says his subject matter has shifted over the years, with the evolution of the industry—from basic and immediate legal issues to broader, deeper, finer themes related to sustaining success.

"Back in the day, rental dealers didn't think too long-

"MY STYLE APPEALED TO SOME, BUT DEFINITELY NOT TO OTHERS—ESPECIALLY OTHERS WHO DEEMED ME TOO BALANCED AND TOO ETHICAL TO BE A TRULY EFFECTIVE RENT-TO-OWN LAWYER. MOST OF THOSE DEALERS ARE GONE; I'M STILL HERE."

sue," Winn confides). Today, he still can be seen in-person at most APRO events and talks via telephone to at least one rental dealer a day.

"Members never call the lawyer to pass the time of day or share good news; it's always because something has gone wrong," Winn notes. "But I'm always eager to hear what issues they're facing, what's on their minds. I keep notes of what we talk about and those conversations build the basis for the seminars I present at conventions and meetings."

"Ed's unique perspective and witty delivery make even the most mundane topics fairly fascinating," says APRO's Education Director Shelley Martinek. "Thirty years later, his seminars are still the most popular and most praised at every convention—or anywhere rental dealers gather."

"I believe I've been speechless exactly one time in my life," Winn recollects. "A rental dealer gave me a Harley Davidson for my birthday one year; it came wrapped with a bow at my law office. I just didn't know what to say."

But where most APRO members know Winn best is from his byline. Winn has penned almost 350 articles for this and other industry publications, on subjects from collections to keep rates. "I always wanted to be a writer," Winn confesses. "I even have an extensive collection of fountain pens, which I use every day. I wish I had written the Great American Novel, but that's not likely to happen at this point. The rent-to-own industry has provided me the opportunity

term," Winn says. "They saw an opportunity to make a quick buck and they were ready to make it and go, if need be. Today, the industry is inter-generational—rental dealers are literally building RTO empires that will last long after they're gone. There's an unprecedented stability in rent-to-own, and that is a good thing."

Raised with a professorial papa within the academic arena, Winn grew up thinking success was measured by test scores and diplomas. Today, he says he's been schooled by rental dealers to know better.

"An important life lesson rent-to-own dealers have taught me is that you can learn many, many things outside of a classroom," Winn says. "Success is a measure of what you do and how you do it. Some of the smartest and most accomplished people I've ever had the honor of knowing have diploma-free walls—they rent TVs for a living."

So, what do we know for sure about the somewhat enigmatic Ed Winn? He's an award-winning teacher. A prolific writer. A great strategic mind. He is brilliant. A little bawdy. Compelling. Candid. Droll. Loves a well-developed lexicon, but loathes a gasconade (got your dictionary?). He is revered by some as a rent-to-own god. CONTINUED ON PAGE 47

Winn FROM PAGE 19

And beyond the realm of rent-to-own? A devoted family man, of course. "I've written my mother a letter every week since I was 18 and living in France—junior year abroad—in an era before cell phones and computers," Winn says. "You had to go to the post office to make transatlantic calls, which were quite expensive, so I wrote letters instead. I continue the practice today; every week I send a letter to her in Nashville, where she, my dad, two younger sisters and their families all live."



sons a while to get through school and get established to a degree that will let them care for me in the style to which I still hope to become accustomed," Winn chuckles.

But what may be taxing to Winn's finances is good news for rent-to-own. Regardless of whether he's concealed by the proverbial curtain, Winn in many ways manifests the brains, heart and nerve of rent-to-own. And as long as he wants to call it home, the industry will gratefully embrace its wizard.

But lest we link rent-to-own and Ed Winn too synonymously, claim him too wholly and solely for our own, he slyly mentions his all-time favorite job, which was utterly unrelated to rent-to-own and lasted only three summers, yet somehow manages to eclipse his 30 years with APRO. "I'm a tennis player—not a particularly talented one, but enthusiastic," Winn begins. "I once taught tennis at a French camp for girls on an island off the coast of Maine, Les Chalets Francaise—175 female campers and counselors and five guys. I ate a lot of lobster fresh off the boat. It was the best job I ever had; it beat the hell out of the law and every other job I can think of." *

Kristen Card is a freelance business writer based in Austin, Texas.

Which adds up to more than 1,100 letters written during Winn's 22-year marriage to Elizabeth, one of his students from his teaching days—prior to the advent of political correctness and rampant sexual harassment suits. "Coeds were one of the perks of being a college professor back then," Winn asserts, then sniggers—tongue firmly in cheek—"I got out just in time."

Today, the Winns' twin sons are students at The University of Texas at Austin, which, Winn says, will keep him around APRO and rent-to-own for years to come. "It's going to take my



Rental Information Systems, Inc.

800-863-7394

powerful...integrated...software solutions

for the rental-purchase industry



Point of Sale



- ✓ Powerful Customer Management Tools
- ✓ Powerful Inventory Management Tools
- ✓ Employee Timekeeping
- ✓ On-Screen Collections
- ✓ Customer Quotes
- ✓ Laser Rental Agreements
- ✓ Automatic Pricing
- ✓ Integrated Credit Card Processing
- ✓ Powerful Reporting
- ✓ Simple Integration with other Microsoft® Products



Corporate Control



- ✓ Powerful Consolidated Reporting
- ✓ Centralized Inventory Control
- ✓ Purchase Orders
- ✓ Inventory Depreciation
- ✓ Daily Summary Reports
- ✓ Performance Reporting
- ✓ System Audit Reporting
- ✓ Region and Division Reporting
- ✓ Inventory Transfer Verification
- ✓ Simple Integration with other Microsoft® Products



Web Based Tools



RAMONLINE™
Online Customer Payments

Customers Login Securely to:

- ✓ Make Account Payments
- ✓ Review Open and Closed Agreements
- ✓ Request Address Changes



RAMVOICE™
Automated Voice Messaging
Powered By: Vontoo

- ✓ Collect Cash Faster
- ✓ Improve Account Manager Efficiency
- ✓ Cut Collection Costs
- ✓ Launch Sales Promotions

1705 E. North Street • Magnolia, AR 71753 • 800-863-7394 • www.rentinfo.com



APRO Associate Member since 1987