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President, Elliott
Electric Supply



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NAED'S 2009 ARTHUR W. HOOPER AWARD RECIPIENT

bill elliot



A MAN OF HONOR

On May 19, Bill Elliott, president of Elliott Electric Supply, will be presented with NAED's highest honor: the Arthur W. Hooper Award. by Misty Byers

Nearly every year since 1992 (no award was given in 1994 and 1996), NAED's Arthur W. Hooper Award has been awarded "to an individual who has served the industry in an outstanding and unselfish way over the course of his or her career in the distribution of electrical goods." (See page 63 for a list of past winners.) This year, the honor goes to Bill Elliott, president of Elliott Electric Supply in Nacogdoches, Texas.

photos by Clay Bostian Creative Photography

For those who know Bill Elliott, the news that he is being awarded NAED's most prestigious honor comes as no surprise.

"Bill Elliott has great vision, a great work ethic, and unquestioned integrity," said Dominic Pileggi, chairman and CEO of Thomas & Betts. "Through that vision, and with a lot of hard work, he and his family have built one of the most successful electrical distributorships in our entire industry."

But Elliott's success in electrical distribution extends beyond personal gain. Dedicated to making the industry better for everyone in it, Elliott has been an active voice in the channel, serving as chair of NAED from 2005 to 2006 and as chair of NAED's Education & Research Foundation.

When asked to describe him, those who know Elliott well used phrases such as "a true icon," "a fair and demanding leader," and "a bedrock of the industry." When asked to speak about him as a friend, each one spoke of honesty, unselfishness, and integrity.

"Bill is passionate about his industry and his company, and constantly focused on both," said James Rudd, a product manager at Elliott Electric Supply. "His involvement in his business and industry is not a 'job' to him; it's simply his life, 24/7."

"What I admire most about Bill is that he cares," said Pileggi. "He cares about the industry as a whole, and he cares about his family, his suppliers, his customers, his employees, and even his competitors."

GROUNDING IN PASSION

"Bill is extremely passionate about his family, his business, and the electrical industry," said Dave Bucklew, director of global channel management for Eaton. "He devotes considerable time improving the industry, balancing the key concerns of distributors and suppliers, and keeping an eye on his customers' interests."

In 1972, Elliott and his late wife, Micky, started a small distribution business. Since its beginning, Elliott has maintained a commitment to the goal of having a minimum rate of 15% compounded annual growth, and has not only made a profit every year since its inception, but also often doubled its annual growth. Today, the company has 98 locations and, in 2008, reported sales of \$383 million.

"The work that all of us did to create Elliott Electric Supply gives me the greatest sense of pride. We used technology to create a low-cost, high-service model with local management and local responsibility," said Elliott, who all throughout his career has displayed a dedication to building not only his own business, but also a better channel for everyone in it. He added that while he is active in a number of local organizations and causes, "I feel a particular obligation to the industry that has been so good to my family and our associates. I look forward to every opportunity to improve the business."

"One of Bill's most remarkable qualities is his willingness to sacrifice his time and money for the advancement of his company and his industry," said Rudd, who has been with the company since its inception. "Bill has the same dedication, focus, and passion about his company and industry that he had in the beginning. His customers' success, his company's success, the industry's success, and his employees' success all come before his personal gains."

"I enjoy the business and I enjoy sharing any insights I can contribute to it, as well as collecting insights others have," Elliott said. "I like to see other people be successful. Educated distributors are our best competition, and bringing the whole industry up is a goal that we should all have."

"I've learned everything I know about the distribution business from him, including the fact that we're only as good as the people we surround ourselves with," said Billy Elliott, Elliott Electric's vice president and son of this year's Hooper Award winner. "He's very passionate about it and has always

Personal notes

Before orchestrating the beginnings of Elliott Electric Supply, Bill Elliott was a member of an orchestra—a violist, to be exact. "My degree is in music," said Elliott. "My major was the trombone. I played viola in the orchestra and could play most brass instruments—poorly.

"I would have enjoyed teaching, but I met Micky and felt like it wouldn't provide the life I wanted for her," he explained. "My dad started a supply business in Bossier City, La., that sold utility products. I worked there summers and began selling to contractors. I felt like it was a better opportunity. By the time I made my mind up, taking additional classes to get a different degree didn't make sense, so I finished in music."

Starting out on one path and ending up on another isn't uncommon—knowing without reservation that the path you've taken is the right one is a rarer gift. "I'm definitely a better supply man than musician," Elliott said. "This business has been my vocation and avocation. It's a great hobby and I look forward to every opportunity to improve the business."

He offered the following advice to others looking for the same kind of satisfaction in their jobs—and lives:

- Marry the right woman and stick to it.
- Make your business your hobby.
- Reinvest profit in your business, not your lifestyle.
- Do what you say you will do.
- Choose your associates carefully and selectively.
- Seek good advice and make decisions with their advice in mind.
- Favor your managers' ideas over your own if possible; they'll work harder to prove they are right.
- Set standards and give managers the responsibility, authority, and incentive to excel.
- Rigorously implement and continuously improve a system that will produce the greatest value for your customers, employees, and suppliers.
- Find solutions that are fair and that benefit all parties. —M.B.



"Bill challenges employees and provides the opportunity and support systems for them to grow with the business and be successful." — RICK MOEHRING

"When we go to NAED meetings he is always asking questions and meeting new people. He'll talk to anyone, large or small, distributor or manufacturer." — BILLY ELLIOTT

been good at asking for input, listening, and making good decisions.

"And he's not shy about telling you what he thinks," Billy Elliott added. "You may not always like his input, but you know where you stand. He is always willing to listen to your opinion, and he's always willing to be convinced."

DRIVEN TO LEAD

"Bill is a 'hands-on' leader intimately involved and very passionate about the supply business," noted Rick Moehring, Nacogdoches area manager. "He embraces technology and changes that lead to better efficiencies and greater productivity. Bill challenges employees and provides the opportuni-

ties and support systems for them to grow with the business and be successful."

"While Bill has many remarkable qualities, what strikes me the most is that he is up front, open, and willing to share," said Bob Smith, president/CEO of IMARK Group; Bill Elliott currently serves as chair of the marketing cooperative. "Many in business play it close to the vest in sharing best practices, but not Bill—he is open and honest with the objective of making the industry better, and not just Elliott Electric.

"In many ways Bill is like the old Vince Lombardi Packers," Smith added. "Everyone knew he ran the famed 'Packer Sweep' to perfection but nobody could duplicate it and no one could stop it."

"History says it best," noted Rudd. "Bill started an electrical distributor in a small town with \$20,000 and an \$80,000 loan. The company did \$400,000 in sales the first year and over the next 37 years, Bill grew it to the 24th largest distributor in the country with 98 branches, more than 800 employees, and approaching \$400 million in sales—and he did it with simple, basic business beliefs that he lives every day and instills in those around him."

One of those beliefs, noted Rudd: If you are not growing, you are dying. From 1976, when he assisted in writing the first piece of software for the company, to 2005, when he chose "Building Your Bottom Line" as the theme of his term as chair of NAED, Bill Elliott has worked to grow the entire industry to a more profitable place.

"Bill has been the strongest industry proponent for profitability for all participants in the market," said Kirk Hachigian, president/CEO of Cooper Industries. "Anyone visiting their headquarters can see the amount of energy he puts into driving costs out of transactions, educating personnel, building vendors and customers, and improving efficiencies in all processes. He is a role model to the overall industry."

"The longer that I am in this business, the more I realize the great opportunity that we have to improve," said Bill Elliott. "There are so many things that are undone that need to be done and they would make this whole business so much more profitable. That's what I get out of this business—the challenge of trying to find a better way of doing things."

On his to-do list: EDI ("EDI is a good step, but it's an antiquated system," he noted); net pricing ("Why don't we know whether we're making a net profit every time we make an order?" he asked. "We need to be calculating net profit on every transaction and we ought to know that when we accept an order that we are making money on the order"); and profits ("It's unacceptable to me that this industry makes only 2% net profit on sales," he noted. "We make four times what the industry average is, and I know others can do it too").

Of course, it's one thing to have an idea; it's another thing to make that idea work. "It takes discipline and hard work to make a concept a workable concept," said Bill Elliott. "And there's more 'better' ways of doing things than I've been able to get around to, but I would like to fix as many things as I can before I check out."

"Bill understands the importance and key ingredients of a true relationship," noted Bucklew. "He has always been fair and focused on eliminating waste from the channel. He reinvests his profits back into the business, which provides benefits to both Elliott Electric and his supplier partners for many years to come."

"Bill is always looking for ways to improve the business and control expenses," noted Phil Hale, computer services director. "Not only is he very knowledgeable about the business, but he is also a great leader. He empowers his employees with flexibility, direction, and great advice to help all of us to be successful in our jobs. Even after all the years that I have worked for Bill, I am still learning something new from him all the time."

DEDICATED TO THE INDUSTRY

"Bill has devoted his entire life to the electrical industry and has always felt NAED played a part in the success of his business," said Robert Flores, CFO at Elliott Electric.

"His support of NAED and the electrical industry as a whole has been a timeless dedication," noted Hale. "He believes in supporting NAED and working with everyone in the industry to improve how we do business."

"He has always been very passionate about the business," added Billy Elliott. "When we go to NAED meetings he is always asking questions and meeting new people. He is always learning how other people operate and is always willing to discuss any problems."

Bill Elliott listed three experiences that define his relationship with NAED:

1. Attending NAED meetings: "At my first meetings I had the opportunity to meet and learn from leaders in this industry who have been a personal inspiration," he said. "When I first started out, we were very small, and when I'd go to the NAED meetings and see somebody from a billion-dollar company walking around shaking hands with people and having conversations, I was a little awestruck."

"Later on as I got into it I realized it wasn't just being big that made a company impressive; it was being well-run," he continued. "To be able to mingle with those kinds of people to me was a great honor and a great learning experience."

2. Serving as Education Foundation chair. "Getting the CAP council working is one of my biggest achievements of that time," said Bill Elliott. As NAED Education & Research Foundation chair, his efforts to create an endowment fund for the Channel Advantage Partnership (CAP) served the entire industry and provided research that will improve the supply chain for years to come. During his term as chair, the Foundation raised more than \$6 million worth of com-

Through the years

NAED has handed out the Arthur W. Hooper Award 15 times. Here are the past winners of the association's highest honor:

- 1992:** J. Kirby Risk, Kirby Risk Supply, Lafayette, Ind. (posth.)
- 1993:** Edward Anixter, Englewood Electric Supply, Chicago
- 1995:** Ronald Kinney, All-Phase Elec. Supply, Benton Harbor, Mich.
- 1997:** John Waltersdorf, Tristate Electrical Supply, Hagerstown, Md.
- 1998:** Malcolm Watson, Watson Electric Supply, Dallas
- 1999:** Stanley Weiss, WESCO Distribution, Pittsburgh
- 2000:** Chuck Steiner, Branch Group, Upper Marlboro, Md.
- 2001:** Zev Rosen, Good Friend Electrical Supplies, Toms River, N.J.
- 2002:** William Schnirring, Springfield Electric Supply, Springfield, Ill.
- 2003:** Richard Butler, Butler Supply, Fenton, Mo.
- 2004:** Ted Treadway, Treadway Electric, Little Rock, Ark.
- 2005:** David Crum, Crum Electric Supply, Casper, Wyo.
- 2006:** Robert Lemman, North Coast Electric, Seattle
- 2007:** R. Lee Hite, The Hite Company, Altoona, Pa.
- 2008:** Charles Collat Sr., Mayer Electric Supply, Birmingham, Ala.



"Even after all the years that I have worked for Bill, I'm still learning something new from him all the time." — PHIL HALE

mitments; today that figure stands at nearly \$8 million.

"There were so many people willing to participate—all we had to do was ask," noted Bill Elliott. "It's flattering when someone asks you to take responsibility for something that is important to them, and I feel a responsibility to give back to an industry that's been good to us."

3. Serving as NAED chair. "It was a great honor being chairman," Bill Elliott said. "I'm not sure I lived up to that honor, but I hope that something that I did or said helped someone reach a goal or establish a higher one."

He noted that one of the greatest things he witnessed during his time as chairman was seeing Tom Naber, NAED's president and CEO, move NAED closer to other associations.

"When I first took over there was this feeling that it was them or us," he explained. "But what I saw during my tenure as chairman was a real effort made to reach out to these associations, and this made NAED a kind of hub around which all

of these people can associate."

"Bill continues to contribute to the industry in sharing his knowledge and lifelong experiences," noted Smith. "While Bill has contributed so much personal time and served in so many capacities, it's his sharing of his knowledge and best practices that has made so many NAED members better distributors and businesspeople."

"There is no doubt in my mind that all of us—suppliers, distributors, end-users, and service providers alike—have benefited, directly or indirectly, from Bill's deep and dedicated involvement in our industry," Pileggi added. "I am happy to call him a customer, proud to call him a partner, and honored to call him a friend." ■

Byers is editor of "TED" magazine. Reach her at mbyers@naed.org.