



Over the decades, LaShae and Randy Bock have made their hardware business a vital part of their community.

It's A Hardware Life

Randy and LaShae Bock are always moving. Every time I have seen them, they are running this way or that helping people find what they need to complete whatever project they are taking on at the moment. Recently, they were kind enough to sit still for just a second and tell me about life in the hardware business.

LaShae: Are y'all from the area originally?

LaShae: Yes. Born and raised in Catawba County, just over the water. Randy grew up in the Hickory High area.

Randy: But I've been over here longer than I was over there. I've been over here since I was 20 years old.

LaShae: We live out in the Wittenberg area.

LaShae: When did you decide to get into the hardware business?

Randy: I came over here part time, after I graduated from high school. Bethlehem Hardware was already here, a small store. It was up on the hill across from the post office. I started part time, but the part time was 35 hours a week. But then the next thing I knew it was 45 or 50 hours a week. And then I was full time and it just transpired from there. I was there as a worker for a while. Then I took over as a manager, and a few years after that is when I bought the business. On July 9th it will be 35 years since I started in the business.

People & Culture by Layne Hendrickson



Layne: What do you think this store means to the Bethlehem community?

Randy: We strive to be a good resource for the individual consumer as well as the businesses here.

Layne: Even though it's thoroughly modern in every way, it strikes me as an old time general store in a way. I mean, you've got ice-cream up front and you're selling everything from seed-potatoes to hammers.

Randy: It still has that feel, but we're cutting edge in our technology. We were ahead of a lot of other businesses technologically speaking. We were taking credit cards here, before the local banks offered it! And scanning items and things like that.

LaShae: The other thing that sets us apart is our level of service. Walking the customer to the product for instance. And if we don't have the product here we either locate it at our other store in Taylorsville or ordering it in for them. And trying to have a quick turn around for them. But just having that personal touch is what sets us apart from

the bigger box stores and what they do.

Randy: And having knowledgeable people. People that actually know what they're talking about! (Laughter). We're not going to pretend to know if we don't. We'll try and steer you in the right direction even if we have to send you somewhere else.

Layne: What has been the most challenging part of the hardware business for you?

Randy: Growth. The slow growth of the infrastructure in this area has been the most challenging. It's been slow to make the changes happen that are required to support new homes and businesses. Water, sewer, gas.

LaShae: We should have had the community sewer project done here five years ago. To attract more homes and more businesses to this area. A perfect example is businesses that are not able to be built here because they don't have the sewer capabilities in place.

We're getting ready to go through some changes here. We're converting this store to an Ace Hardware

store in the next couple of weeks. It will be temporary here at this location until our new location is built on the end of Lowe's Foods. We'll be coming down off the hill here! (Laughter). Well, we're limited here. We've maxed out of this building. It's aged on us. Our parking is limited. So, we wanted to be able to do the new store all nice and shiny, and bright, with a bigger sales floor. A lot of exciting things going on!

Layne: Could you speak a little about the personal relationships you've developed over the course of 35 years.

Randy: I've really made a lot of good friends over the years. Gotten to know a lot of customers very well. But it seems like over the last few years, several have passed on. But I guess that comes with getting older. People I have known since when I came here many years ago have started passing on.

LaShae: So, as we're starting to lose those older ones, we're making new connections with the Millennials that are just starting out in life. They're starting new homes, starting

families. They have the same needs as the older generation. We've got to be able to get them in the store, because they're ordering everything on line! (Laughter). As an example, I was outside watering the plants and a young couple came up, and they were buying plants for the first time. And they were like, 'How many plants do we need?' and 'How far apart do we plant them?' and those sorts of questions. They had never done it before. It was good to see people that age, kids to me, doing that sort of thing.

Layne: That must be rewarding for you, but what would you say was the most rewarding part of the hardware business?

Randy: It's been the people. Helping somebody take care of what they need. Generally speaking, when somebody comes in here, they're in need of something. We do have shoppers too, but 90 percent of the folks that come in here have a problem that they need a solution to.

LaShae: A good example of that is when the tornado went through last year. We were open.

Randy: It sounded like it was going to tear this building apart because it came very close to here. We had the staff get near one of the poles. It knocked the power out around 4:00 and we were dead in the water. Later on that night, we found out about

the devastation. My manager and I were up here the next morning hooking up generators and temporary lighting. We got the computers up and running. The phone system too. And by 8:00 that morning, which is when we normally open, we could service our customers! It was pretty dark in here and people were bringing in chainsaws to be sharpened. We had to run cords out and take the machinery outside where we would have enough light! We helped people all day long running three generators. We had to go all the way down to Conover to get fuel to run the generators to operate the next day.

LaShae: That's what it's about. When we have an emergency, when we have a snow storm, he's out shoveling his truck and then this hill at 5:00 in the morning to be able to get the store open because the customers are going to need us! I'm going to toot Randy's horn a little bit for him because I'm a proud wife, but through the economic downturn that hit, he survived. There were a lot of hardware stores that closed. We lost a lot of businesses around here through those years. But the way he managed the business helped it through that.

Randy: You've got to love what you're doing and care about it with a passion. ●



The Bethlehem True Value will be rebranding as an Ace Hardware store within a few weeks and will later move to a new location that will be built on the end of Lowe's Foods.



LaShae Bock chats with longtime customer David Hefner.