

# Ray Neisewander Jr.:

## A Tribute

Life Story Yields Lessons for Door Professionals

*Editor's Note: When writing a story about an industry leader, the writer is usually dependent on company-generated press releases and, with luck, an interview with that leader. However, in this case, I have an extraordinary reservoir of personal information about Ray Neisewander Jr.*

*Part of that reservoir comes from my interactions with Ray and working in corporate communications at Raynor for 10 years (1989 to 1999). Some of it also comes from my father, Bill Wadsworth, who worked at Raynor from 1948 to 1990. He worked closely with Ray on the Raynor management team for decades, and they remained good friends through the remainder of Ray's life.*

*Yet most of my knowledge comes from the extensive research that was required to write a history of Raynor, a project that Ray Jr. asked me to undertake in 1989. That work culminated in 2000 with the completion of a 180-page book on Raynor history.*

*Industry professionals who read our magazine are constantly searching for good ideas on how to run their companies. This article certainly offers ideas, but it also gives tribute to a longtime industry leader who was widely admired and respected by employees, door dealers, suppliers, and competitors.*



Ray Neisewander Jr., the chairman of the board of Raynor Worldwide, died on Oct. 25, 2013, at his home in Dixon, Ill., after a long illness. He was 81.

The depth of Ray's involvement in the industry is likely unparalleled among leaders of garage door companies throughout the world. The admiration that people had for Ray was equally remarkable.

How did this man get to be so admired? Let me tell you.

### Work for Your Money

Ray once told me about an incident from his youth when he went to the airport to meet his father, Ray Neisewander Sr., who started Raynor in 1944. At that time, Ray Jr. was feeling a financial pinch, and he knew that his father had the means to fill his need.

But Ray Sr. replied, "Son, the only way to get money is to work for it."

The boy went away empty-handed, but he pocketed the incident in his memory and never forgot the lesson.

an important conversation. The father asked the sergeant what he intended to do after the Army. Ray Jr. was open to suggestion, and his father recommended that he start a Raynor distributorship. The son agreed.

"There was a plan to learn the business," Ray told me.

### Life as a Door Dealer

Upon his discharge from the Army in 1956, Ray moved to Bettendorf, Iowa, to start Raynor Door Sales. Ray Sr. selected the site, only 60 miles west of Dixon, because it was close to the factory, and that area lacked a Raynor dealer.

"I felt that I had a lot to learn," said Ray Jr. "I knew nothing about selling garage doors, installation, or service. I was like the new kid on the block."

But he learned quickly, and the business thrived. In 1961, after five years of learning the struggles and frustrations of a garage door dealer, the 29-year-old Neisewander sold his successful dealership and moved to Dixon to

Senior: "I'm surprised to see you here."

Junior: "I decided to stick around and see what happens."

Senior: "Good decision."

Tolerating the small paychecks, Ray continued training throughout the company. In the factory, he operated the wood door clamp, assembled track, ran the spring winder, operated a punch press, worked in shipping, and learned machine maintenance. In the office, he worked everywhere from the customer service desk to engineering and accounting.

### First Management Challenge

In 1967, at the age of 35, Ray was given his first significant management challenge: fix the nagging problem of product damage during truck delivery. The problem was not minor; it seriously threatened the all-important relationship between the factory and the door dealer. At the time, all shipments left the factory by common carrier, i.e., independent trucking firms.

Ray dug in. After months of trying various solutions, Ray concluded that the only viable option was to get into the trucking business with company-owned trucks and company-employed drivers. The effort would be a major investment, but it appeared to be the best long-term solution to repair and solidify the factory's relationship with dealers.

In 1968, Ray selected and placed an order for the company's first tractor and trailer, at a cost of about \$20,000. The initial shipments were a rousing success, and more dealers began wanting shipment on these trucks. Within one year, the company had bought three tractors and trailers.

### A Truck Driver's Best Friend

"We noticed an instant reduction in damage," recalled Ray, identifying three reasons for the dramatic improvement. "First, the drivers cared about the product. Second, there were no transfers. And third, the drivers were trained how to handle the product."

Ray immersed himself in the trucking division and even learned how to drive a semi. "He wanted to understand the process in the same way he wanted to understand unloading lumber from a rail car," said Bill Wadsworth, then vice president of manufacturing.

"In those early years, each driver would walk into Ray's office, usually on a Friday, for a chat about the week's delivery

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“I decided to stick around and see what happens.”

So Ray went to work. While still in grade school, he began working during the summer for 75 cents an hour at Capitol Wood Works, his father's factory in Springfield, Ill. He continued working there during summers through high school and college.

### A Plan to Learn the Business

During his summer break in 1953, he began his work in the garage door world at the Raynor factory in Dixon. No, he didn't have a soft job in the office. He unloaded lumber from the hot rail cars and loaded finished garage doors into trucks, two of the most grueling tasks in the factory.

Ray's work and school schedule was interrupted in 1954 when he volunteered for the Army at age 22, feeling that he would soon be drafted anyway. Entering the Army as a private, Ray eventually advanced to the rank of supply sergeant.

As Ray neared completion of his two years of military service, he and his father had

learn the struggles of a manufacturer.

His first job was order writing. At his dealership, he had been placing orders from the other end of the phone, but now he was learning how to receive those orders, provide helpful service, and ensure accuracy.

### Take This Job and Shove It

When his first paycheck arrived a week or so later, Ray was miffed when the amount was only \$65. Accustomed to larger paychecks as a door dealer, Ray was mad enough to call his dad in Springfield and give him a piece of his mind.

But the father firmly said, "You'll be paid whatever that job pays."

The angry son replied, "Then you can take this job and shove it up your a\*\*."

After a few days of silence, Ray Sr. came to Dixon for the annual Raynor Christmas party. At a break in the program, Ray Sr. went to the men's room, where he happened to see Ray Jr.

# Ray Jr. valued other viewpoints, and he saw the need to give others the freedom to speak their minds and take ownership of a job.

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experience,” he added.

Throughout Ray’s active life at Raynor, he held a special relationship with truck drivers. They all knew it, and consequently, they all knew their crucial roles in the success of the company.

## **Earning a Seat at the Table**

By 1979, the fleet had grown to 18 tractors and more than 30 trailers, and it continued to grow from there. The impact of Ray’s efforts was significant.

As Wendell Snell, then vice president of sales, said, “If we were not in the trucking business, we would not be in the door business.”

As the Raynor trucking fleet grew, so did Ray’s management responsibilities. In 1968, Ray Sr. made his 36-year-old son an executive vice president and a member of the management team.

## **The Greatest Challenge**

Ray’s greatest challenge came via a phone call from Springfield, Ill., on the final Friday of October 1979. Ray Neisewander Sr., then 73, had suffered a heart attack at home and had been rushed to the hospital. When Ray Jr. called the hospital that evening, he learned that his father had just died.

Not only did he have to absorb the shock of his father’s sudden death, but Ray Jr. also had to grasp the enormity of what had just happened. Instead of just 18 Raynor trucks, Ray’s domain now included the entire 350-employee Raynor company, the Capitol Wood Works factory, and three Holiday Inns in Decatur and Springfield built by his father.

In addition to his greatly expanded responsibilities, Ray Jr. had even more on his plate. Three of Raynor’s original management team were retiring, the company had just expanded its product line to include residential and commercial operators, and the country was in the midst of a major economic crisis with runaway inflation and interest rates.

Ray Jr., now 47, quickly began to feel the weight of his newfound responsibilities. “I just thought, ‘Oh man, what a load I’ve got,’” he said.

## **Keeping the Team Together**

Two weeks after Ray Sr.’s funeral, the load officially shifted to Ray Jr.’s shoulders when he became the Raynor president at a meeting of the corporate board. At that point, Ray could have dismantled the team management approach at Raynor. After all, he was now president, and three of the original five vice president positions were in transition.

But Ray never considered that option. “I never did,” he told me in 2000. “With team management, it made it (managing) easier and simpler,” he added. “We continued to make decisions as a team and grow the company. With the team behind me, I felt very confident.”

Accustomed to the give-and-take of group dynamics, Ray Jr. valued other viewpoints, and he saw the need to give others the freedom to speak their minds and take ownership of a job.

Bill Wadsworth served with Ray for more than 21 years of management meetings. “In all those meetings,” Wadsworth said, “Ray never smothered the discussion with a



dominating presence. It would have taken only one meeting with one pound of the fist on the table, but he didn’t do that.”

## **Appreciation for Employees**

When I asked Ray Jr. what he learned from his father, he first cited “honesty and a concern for all employees.” When he was asked about the reasons for the company’s success, Ray’s first response was usually “the employees.”

Having walked in virtually every employee’s shoes, Ray Jr. held a sincere appreciation for each person’s job. The chore of unloading lumber from the rail cars, for example, was often viewed as the lowest position in the plant. But Ray, who had done that job, regarded it as yet another essential task for the company.

“You’ve got to unload the lumber before you can make a door,” he explained.

His appreciation for employees was likely enhanced by the fact that he lived for a half century in a small town of 15,000 people. Consequently, Ray was a familiar and friendly face you’d see on the street, in the grocery store, or at the local watering hole.

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### Comfortable Work Environment

Instead of, “Good morning, Mr. Neisewander,” employees and door dealers felt comfortable just saying, “Hey, Ray.” An ordinary person who never put on airs, Ray was just as comfortable talking with factory workers as he was with door dealers or management.

Ray’s non-oppressive management style at the top fostered a comfortable working environment throughout the company. His spirit of freedom and respect for employees filtered down to all managers and all departments.

Employees could feel the difference even as they pulled into the parking lot where Ray did not allow reserved parking spaces for Raynor management. “I felt it would be preferential treatment,” he told me.

Ray refrained from status symbols that implied that management employees were better than anyone else. He lived in the same modest home for over 40 years, and he rarely wore a tie to work. In 2000, Ray still drove his red 1988 Oldsmobile to work every day,

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and he parked that car, like any employee would, in the best parking space he could find.

### Good Corporate Citizen

“Ray Sr. didn’t want management to get involved in the community,” noted Bill Wadsworth, “but Ray Jr. was just the opposite. He believed in supporting the community.”

Ray served on several local boards including the Dixon United Way, the Dixon Family YMCA, the Dixon Airport, and the largest local bank. Through Ray, Raynor

became a constant financial supporter of dozens of local institutions, such as the public and parochial schools, the library, the theatre, many charities, and much more.

As a result of his generosity, in 1993, the Illinois State Board of Education honored him with the prestigious Award of Excellence. In 1996, the Dixon Area Chamber of Commerce honored him as one of the first recipients of its annual Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his extensive community support.

Around 2000, I asked Ray if he was



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glad for all he'd done for the community. "Absolutely," he replied, "but I have to say that we were also doing it for our employees. Hopefully, it will make a better community to live in, and we can all share in that."

### Industry Leader

Ray's support of external organizations also extended to the National Association of Garage Door Manufacturers (NAGDM). First named to the NAGDM board in 1972, he was elected NAGDM president in 1973, 40 years ago.

Continuing on the board, he was elected NAGDM treasurer in 1986, an office he held until 1996 when NAGDM became DASMA. In 2000, at age 68 and after nearly 30 years of unparalleled industry leadership, Ray quietly resigned his position on the DASMA board of directors. In 2006, IDA presented him the industry's first Heritage Award for outstanding contributions to the garage door industry.

### Standing Ovation

In early 1997, Ray suffered a mild heart attack and underwent quintuple bypass heart surgery.

After several weeks of recuperation, he slowly resumed his pattern of working full time.

Ray's next appearance before Raynor dealers was in 1998. When the 66-year-old executive was introduced at a group dinner, I was there when more than 500 Raynor distributors and employees erupted in a spontaneous, extended standing ovation.

This outburst of warmth demonstrated how much dealers admired this humble industry leader. In his remaining years, he gradually faded into retirement. But admiration for Ray never faded. It only grew.

### Coming to Say Goodbye

He died on the last Friday evening in October, as his father did 34 years earlier. At noon on Monday, Oct. 28, Raynor employees in Dixon gathered outside the factory for a moment of silence in Ray's honor. The gathering was a powerful and moving reminder of the employees' admiration and respect for this man.

On Oct. 30, an estimated 800 people flocked to the visitation at St. Anne's Church in Dixon. Most waited in line for two hours

before seeing the family. Besides scores of Raynor employees and retirees, there were door dealers and industry executives from throughout the U.S. and Canada, as well as local and state officials.

At Ray's funeral on Oct. 31, a new Raynor tractor-trailer led the funeral procession to the gravesite, and another one followed. It was a fitting tribute to the captain of the fleet, a much-admired friend of truck drivers, factory workers, door dealers, and industry executives.

Fitting indeed. ■



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