

News of Plumbing, Heating, Cooling and Industrial PVF



## SHOWROOM OF THE YEAR

**Leeps Supply Co.**, a family-owned and -operated wholesale plumbing distributor headquartered in Indiana, is *The Wholesaler Magazine's* 2020 Showroom of the Year. Focusing on customer experience, giving back to the community, and with faith, it continually adapts to exceed expectations. Read its story, starting on page 20. From left to right: Charlene Schultz, Monica Rodriguez, Ruth Hamstra, John Hamstra, Doug Van Der Weide, Elizabeth Alfonso and Jordanne Vroom.

## Robertson Heating Supply Agrees to Acquire Valley Supply Co.

**Robertson Heating Supply** (RHS) is pleased to announce it has completed a letter of intent to purchase the assets of Valley Supply Co. (VSC). VSC has four locations in West Virginia located in Elkins, Clarksburg, Parkersburg and St. Albans. Robertson will expand its offering and representation of top tier plumbing and heating products across the state, including the Rheem HVAC line in 40 West Virginia counties.

President Scott Robertson commented that VSC is a respected distributor in West Virginia with a

high level of customer service, and this is an excellent opportunity to bring RHS' strengths and competitive advantages to the professional trade in this region. The acquisition is also in line with the RHS strategic plan for continued growth in the HVAC and plumbing wholesale channel as West Virginia becomes the fifth state with brick and mortar locations, which also includes Ohio, western Pennsylvania, Michigan and Indiana. RHS, following its customer focus and promotion of local branch operations, will maintain many VSC

personnel in the acquisition.

RHS is an 86-year-old family-owned Midwest regional HVAC and plumbing distributor headquartered in Alliance, Ohio, with soon-to-be 36 locations and six kitchen and bath showrooms. Robertson is a full line distributor of heating, air conditioning HVAC accessories, boilers, water heaters, plumbing fixtures, cabinetry and associated accessories.



# SHOWROOM OF THE YEAR

## SHOWCASING EXCELLENCE THROUGH KINDNESS

**Leeps Plumbing Supply, a company built on service, and honoring God in all they do.**

BY RUTH MITCHELL

**W**hen searching for excellence — in any fashion — it is not always what appears to the eye, but what is also felt. It's that intrinsic something that sets one or another apart, gives it a twist and keeps your attention.

In our search for this year's Showroom of the Year honoree, we came upon a company with a unique story, and a foundation built upon servicing God and humankind. Nick Leep, an Indiana gentleman who wanted to open a store built upon his conviction of helping others, founded Leeps Supply Co. in 1954. "My father wanted to start a company to serve people and the community," says Ruth (Leep) Hamstra, Nick's daughter — who, along with two brothers and four sisters, make up the Leeps family.

Fast-forward to 2020, and Leeps Supply Co., a plumbing supply wholesale distributor based in Highland, Ind., remains family-owned and

—operated. Ruth Hamstra, along with her husband, John Hamstra, run the family business. Ruth's son John Jr. is now the third generation to carry on the tradition.

The plumbing distributor has three showrooms, 89 employees and two warehouses totaling 75,000 square feet. Focused on the trade as well as the consumer, sales consist of 35 percent walk-in, 20 percent builder, and 50 percent plumber/contractor, with more than \$2 million in sales per year coming from the Crown Point showroom. The company is a member of The Luxury Product group and the American Supply Association.

Its first showrooms opened in 1989. In 2009, Leeps opened its first WaterPlace showroom — an upscale, fully designed and progressive plumbing showroom in New Buffalo, Mich. Soon after, the distributor followed up with showrooms in Valparaiso and Crown Point, Indi-



*Clean lines, lots of natural light and easy navigation of the showroom floor provide a relaxing environment in the Crown Point, Ind., showroom.*

ana. The showrooms are named to reflect the spirit and vitality of the company.

The secret to the company's continued success is that it remains true to Nick Leep's vision of helping people and the community while honoring God in all they do.

### **Serving with Compassion, Respect**

Leep had a way with people — he was a hands-on, roll-up-the-sleeves-and-do-what-needs-to-be-done type of individual. He was a man who had the gift of connecting with people on many levels.

## SHOWROOM OF THE YEAR

"Customers would come in and buy a part, and my father would say 'Do you know what to do with it?'" recalls Ruth Hamstra. "He would sit down and draw diagrams to make sure they understood how it should be installed. He would spend over an hour with customers — making sure they had what they needed and knew how it worked."

Leep was a businessman who understood people and was a man of his word, a trait he instilled in others. He would often do business on a handshake when times were tough and customers couldn't immediately pay. "My father would look the customer in the eye and have them promise to pay their bill, and then shake on it," Hamstra says. "It was his sense of old-fashioned values and faith in people and wanting to take care of them."

This sense of purpose and guidance extended not only to customers but also to the company vendors — who are referred to as Leeps' partners. Customers are called guests because the business is viewed as an extension of the Leep's home, and anyone who walks through the door is a guest.

There are moments in time that mark a person, and a time or a situation that reaffirms one's mission. Nick Leep had an experience that touched him to the core. In the mid-'60s, he had moved the company into a new location and was settling in. One day, while he was outside the store, a gentleman asked him for money to help tide him over. Generous as always, Nick obliged, and the

John and Ruth Hamstra, alongside son John Jr. The company remains family owned and -operated, and carries on the spirit of Ruth's father, Nick Leep.



gentleman looked him in the eye and said, "The Lord is going to bless your business." The man turned and walked away and Nick, taken aback, was silent for a moment.

When he looked up, the man was gone — no trace of him.

It was a pivotal moment as his faith ran deep, and he carried the story in his heart. "When my father started the business, he desired to honor the Lord," Hamstra says. "And he did it by honoring people and respecting people, serving them as best he could."

And it shows.

When Leep passed away, the stories of his compassion and dedication to people were heartwarming. Hamstra recalls hearing wonderful stories of her father from customers. One such story came from a customer who was building his house and bought a water heater from Nick Leep, who then helped the customer install it.

It's easy to see that the foundation of the company is carried on

through the Hamstras — Ruth, John and John Jr.

When asked what brought John Jr. back into the business, he quickly responded: "I was at a funeral for a friend's father, and they were talking about what an honor it was for them to work for their father. It's that sense of family and pride of the individual who built a legacy. At that moment, I thought I've always loved working at Leeps, and it's time to go back and carry on those traditions."

"I see my dad here — his presence and his legacy," Ruth notes. "I see the passion and compassion in my son for humankind and the company, and it excites me to see my father's legacy carried on."

### Legacy of Integrity

The company website proudly states its mission: "Our goal is to be the best plumbing supply house by treating our customers, suppliers and employees with honesty and respect. We will never lose sight of what is important in life — people. In pursuit of excellence, we will continue to push ourselves to reach the ability and talents God has given us. Never compromising the truth, we will keep check on integrity. We will be able to accomplish all of the above, by seeking to attain our ultimate goal — to honor God in all we do."

Faith plays a significant role in the heartbeat and soul of the company — its founder wanted to carry out the mission of doing God's work to help humankind. It translates into the company culture — of taking care of employees and guests, as well as its partners. Employees, in turn, live the lifestyle by taking care of guests in all ways.

It's not unusual for Ruth and John Hamstra to say a prayer for their employees and customers before leaving for work. It's a behavior of caring and developing relationships extending beyond the 9 to 5 business hours that sets Leeps Supply apart.

"We listen to our guests and understand they can purchase products anywhere, but when they walk through our front door, they are an extension of our family," Ruth says. A wall in the showroom has words of kindness and faith written all over it. "It's what we live by every day — faith, honesty, compassion and kindness," she notes.

### The Showroom Experience

When a guest enters one of Leeps Supply's WaterPlace showrooms, she is greeted by the "vice president of first impressions." — the showroom coordinator: "Each customer receives the same attention — all of our attention," explains Doug Van Der Weide, showroom manager of the Crown Point store. "When it comes to WaterPlace, people are the critical factor to success — this includes our employees as well as our customers. Our full focus is on each guest's needs and beyond; we take customer service one person at a time."

The Crown Point showroom is stunning — with vignettes designed to encourage interaction and create an experience with materials, product and settings. More than 40 working displays feature faucets, showerheads — and a full immersion bathroom, where guests can put on their bathing suits and try out the working bathroom amenities, such as lighted mirrors, a body spray shower with steam and an air bathtub.

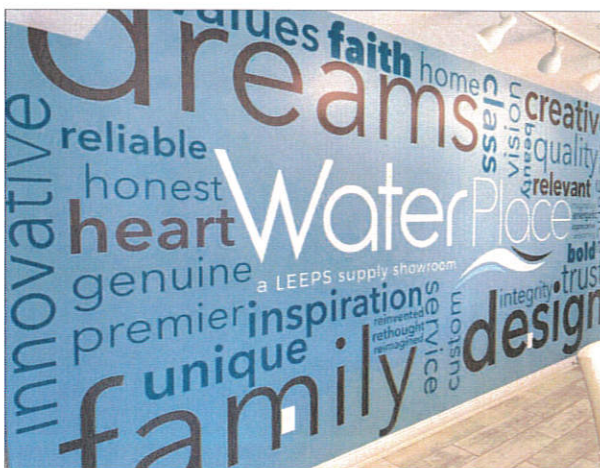
Displays are strategically placed to educate customers on the function and design of each item. Forward-thinking, the company even has an aging-in-place shower vignette — demonstrating that design for purpose can have an appealing luxury feel as well.

The clean lines and brightness of the showroom accentuate the displays, allowing for easy navigation without overwhelming the senses.

"Our focus is on customer experience, hospitality, design, education and

**"IT'S WHAT WE LIVE BY EVERY DAY — FAITH, HONESTY, COMPASSION AND KINDNESS."**

— RUTH HAMSTRA



The company mission and focus are proudly displayed on a wall within the showroom.



A large working display of showerheads is backlit by the WaterPlace sign, which is visible from the road. The display is also a walk-in, and guests have fun in the selection process.



Showing products in settings with different textures (wood walls, wallpaper, etc.) allows guests to experience how design can be applied in their space.

handling quality luxury products," Van Der Wiede says. "Guests think of luxury differently now. Luxury is less pretentious, excellent in design, less indulgent with more attention to quality. We have showrooms where customers can be educated, experience the product, and have a place where the staff can help you put it all together — it's our secret to success."

What catches the eye are in vignettes with their different textures and applications. From showcasing products in a setting with elaborate wallpaper or brick surrounds — and even concrete and clapboard — one can envision how products would fit within their space.

Each showroom is designed with the same product lines, but with different colors and styles. For example, one showroom may have a voice-activated faucet, while another showroom will feature the item as a touch-free faucet in a different finish.

Technology is thoughtfully and thoroughly incorporated into the showroom experience. Wi-Fi-enabled fixtures can be engaged with and experienced as if one was in their own home. Technology goes one step further with virtual reality.

"We have enabled virtual reality to allow our guests to enter a different showroom and experience the products," explains Chris Bengtson, chief operations officer for Leeps Supply Co. "By wearing a pair of goggles, we can transport our guests

into a tour and walk around our other showrooms, and they can see firsthand the product."

There are tags on the products and when a guest focuses in, it will provide messaging Leeps specifically wants to highlight on the product or the brand. "This step allows us to focus on our vendor partners, as well as provide an in-depth customer experience — a deeper dive into the value add we have at Leeps," he notes. Virtual reality also can be experienced on one's cell phone, tablet or computer.

While Leeps Supply was an early adopter of the Internet and online selling, in the early 2000s it decided to get out of the e-commerce business. Instead, it is making its mark by having an engaging website and social media presence. The object of this strategy was to convey the company culture, personality and ability online, then extend that into the brick-and-mortar stores to fulfill and exceed customer experience and expectations.

Under the helm of Josh Cornell, the website allows guests to schedule appointments and provides access to the virtual reality showrooms. It also allows Leeps to engage customers through personalized marketing messages and campaigns. Under his guidance, the website channels guests to enter a showroom, allowing for the full Leeps experience.

#### Forging Career Paths

Leeps believes its employees are

vital to the company's success. As such, it provides training, advancement and support to help employees achieve their personal best. "We believe in making a path for employees to advance within the company," says John Hamstra, Jr. He developed training tracks allowing employees who are interested in another area of the business to obtain the knowledge and tools needed to step into the role when it becomes available.

"We're going to start to promote the people who are already a part of our family," he notes. "We're trying to do it in a way that invests in them because they are what's most important to us."

It is a "role-ready" program; when a position opens up, the employee who trained for the role can step in with confidence in having been prepped for it.

"We understand the importance of developing people from within; John has done a great job in creating a 'role-ready' bench," says Bengtson, adding that it's one of the biggest initiatives for the company — helping its team members, providing a track for success and ensuring the company culture remains true to its mission.

The distributor also includes hands-on, classroom and video training to keep its employees well-informed on products and industry trends. With a training center located in each showroom, it's easy to have speakers and special guests conduct seminars. All the training and education provide a solid knowledge base of product and use, which, in turn, provides customers with the information needed to make decisions not only on style, but form and function as well.

Leeps draws upon the resources of its buying group, The Luxury Products Group, as well as its membership in ASA to strengthen its roots.

"Being a part of LPG has helped us not only in its buying group aspects but also for networking," Bengtson explains. "The ability to glean information from other members on situations and challenges we are facing, as a company and an industry, is so important."

Jeff MacDowell, LPG executive director, says: "What most impresses me about the WaterPlace showroom is that I continually use so many parts of it in my best practice discussions. From the excellent sales team, to the designer's club, to the experience room, to the fact that they educate customers on lighting and plumbing seamlessly in their showroom, I use WaterPlace/ Leeps Supply as a benchmark for other showrooms.

Luxury Products Group is thrilled to have them as part of the team."

#### Community involvement

The company is all-in when it comes to giving back to the community that has supported and created its success. The community is an extension of the company.

Stories were told how the showrooms are utilized for designer and other groups for meetings and social gatherings.

The wholesale distributor partners with Habitat for Humanity and hosts a day where its employees and families come together to assist in a house build. Another organization it supports is Mommy's Haven, an organization for young, unwed mothers. Leeps utilizes its Crown Point WaterPlace showroom to host a Woman's Night Out Fundraiser to help support a home built to house the young mothers.

The company also developed an in-house charity called Leeps Cares in which it raises funds for any employees who may have economic hardships.

#### Small Touches

There is a thoughtfulness extending throughout Leeps Supply Co.'s showrooms and employees that captures the spirit of taking care of people. The ladies' bathroom at the Crown Point showroom is a calming, luxury experience, the wallpaper has embedded Swarovski crystals in its design — upgraded elegance. The distributor is always thinking of comfort in taking care of others; the room also has a luxury armchair for nursing mothers.

John Hamstra is present while I interview the group for this feature, his wife but remains in the background, allowing others to tell the company story. He brought the company culture to life when he saw a contractor had arrived at the plumbing counter, at which point he left the interview. He greeted the individual — and helped him load water heaters onto his truck. Always there to help — in all ways.

I ask Ruth the best piece of advice her father gave her. She leans in, smiles and says, "My father was my hero — a wonderful man who always went the extra mile to help people. He told me, and it sticks with me to this day, that 'kindness is the secret to success.'"

Congratulations to Leeps Supply Co. for its success, and for the kindness and compassion it instills and delivers. ●