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Company of the Month: The W.T. Kenney Company is a family owned and operated painting contractor founded in 1939

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Tom Hayes

Jerry Solomon

The late Dave Downie

Arlington, MA The W.T. Kenney Company is a family owned and operated painting contractor founded in 1939. The company, based in Arlington, MA, is led by president Tim Kenney (3rd generation) and senior vice president Brian Jurgens (4th generation). Not everyone in painting wants to own a business, and there are some great opportunities for careers in supporting roles. It would be very hard for a business to succeed without painters who value and feel valued in their jobs. In 2022, Kenney and Jurgens are celebrating great employees: Men and women who have found an enriching, lifelong career and in return made the painting business great all the way through the ranks.

W.T. Kenney Co. has a page on its website about how it treats and values its employees, and company president Tim Kenney has the receipts to show that WTK has walked that walk. The company boasts painters who have dedicated over 50 years of their life to the business. Even company headquarters has some long-term players; office manager Carole Daniels first came to work in 1978.

Shown (from left) are: Tim Kenney, Dave Downie, Jerry Solomon, Tom Hayes and Brian Jurgens in 2014

Harvard bound

When Jerry Solomon first walked through the doors in 1965, he already had some history. “Jerry talked about how—as a kid—he was in charge of cutting the lead and adding turpentine or linseed oil, as they would often make their own paint,” said Kenney. “Times were tough and money was scarce, so they would put a touch of turpentine in the metal pots and hold them over a bonfire to soften the lead.”

Then they'd chip the charred paint out of the pot and brush a coat of shellac on the inside so they could salvage the pot for the next job. Back in those days, Kenney points out, no one knew the true danger of lead paint fumes.

Shown (from left) are: Tim Kenney 3rd generation, late Allan Kenney 2nd generation, Brian Jurgens 4th generation in 2009

Early in his tenure, Jerry Solomon was tasked with convincing journeymen painters to put down their 6-inch brushes and pick up that newfangled invention—the paint roller. “In the beginning, it was received like Eli Whitney’s cotton gin that required a lot less labor to perform the same tasks,” said Kenney. There was resistance; painters wanted to stick with what they knew, and the early rollers would fall apart easily. Kenney refers to a core somewhat like what you’ll find in a roll of paper towels, and oil paints would often separate fibers and fabric from the core. Eventually though, Jerry succeeded.

One of W.T. Kenney’s first commercial accounts dates from its opening year of 1939—the renovation and restoration of historical properties at Harvard University. Jerry spent three decades as lead foreman on those projects. Today he’s the shop foreman, starting work at 5:30 a.m. six days a week for a company that averages 50 projects at a time. “He dispenses trucks, equipment and stock to the various crews and keeps our offices and shop COVID- free,” said Kenney. “Jerry’s 56 years of dedication to W.T. Kenney are truly a labor of love.”

W.T. Kenney truck at Polaroid Waltham circa 1953

Early to rise

With 48 years under his belt, Tom Hayes is a relative newcomer. He gets to work early, says Kenney, no easy task since he drives an hour each way from New Hampshire. Not only that, but everyone knows when he’s ready to get started. “Several times we have had to remind him of noise ordinances around Harvard Yard and that you can’t fire up a boom at 5:50 in the morning!” Kenney said. Hayes is a no-nonsense, get-it-done guy, and Kenney marvels at his prolific output. “He outproduces most painters half his age,” he said. Hayes is not afraid to get up there—he’s often seen painting a church steeple, putting gold leaf on a weather vane or cutting 12-over-12 windows on a boom. “Tom spent 15 years running work in downtown Boston for clients such as the Bank of New England, Cabot, Cabot & Forbes [a real estate management firm founded in 1897] and several large insurance firms. One might say that he has painted all of Boston twice in his almost half-century of dedication to our trade.”

The door to success

The late Dave Downie retired in 2016 after working a five-decade career at W.T. Kenney. Jurgens says, "Dave passed away suddenly last fall at 86 years old from a stomach aneurysm. He painted with us for 53 years and I can only imagine how many gallons of paint he applied! Dave also went skydiving every Saturday up until two years ago."

"Dave was a master tinter of paints and stains," Kenney recalls. "His ability to blend stains and grain on intricate woodwork was incredible! Prior to mill shops, Dave would be tasked with field staining hundreds of doors each year." Visitors to New England landmarks have doubtless run across Downie's handiwork. He's painted at Berklee College of Music, the Museum of Science, Boston College, a praiseworthy number of churches and cathedrals, and even at the residence of Polaroid founder Edwin Land.

One way you can tell whether a company is a good place to work is how long someone stays on the job. Carole, Tom, Dave and Jerry- thank you for over 200 years of service!

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