



North American Hardware and Paint Association

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Local Entrepreneur Receives 2023 Young Retailer of the Year Award

INDIANAPOLIS—Zane Watkins, general manager and co-owner of Village Hardware in Hatch, New Mexico, was recently named one of the independent home improvement industry's 2023 Young Retailer of the Year honorees by the North American Hardware and Paint Association (NHPA).

The Young Retailer of the Year program, now in its 27th year, identifies and promotes the next generation of aspiring independent home improvement, paint and decorating retailers. It recognizes individual achievement by industry retailers age 35 and younger throughout the U.S. and Canada. Honorees are chosen based on a number of criteria, including professional milestones, community engagement, continuing hardware industry education and extracurricular activities.

Sponsors of the 2023 Young Retailer of the Year program include American Hardware and Lumber Insurance (AHLI), Arrow Fastener, Intertape Polymer Group (IPG), Midwest Fastener, Pony Jorgensen, PPG, STIHL and The Wooster Brush Company.

Zane grew up working for his father at the family's hardware store, Sun Valley Hardware. By the time he was in high school, Zane not only cashiered and loaded purchases, but he also managed inventory and ordering along with learning the automotive side of the business by working the store's NAPA counter.

In August 2006, the nearby arroyo, also known as a gulch or stream bed, flooded the village of Hatch, New Mexico. Sun Valley was hit particularly hard because it sat at one of the lower points in town. While the store was still filled with water, the National Guard arrived to help pump the water out of town, but they needed pipes. Zane went into the store, waded through chest-deep water and fished out all the pipes the store had so the National Guard could drain the town.

Unfortunately, the original building was too damaged to reopen. Zane and his family started building a new location in town. The new Sun Valley opened in September 2007, right after Zane started college at New Mexico State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and marketing, with an emphasis in advertising in 2011.



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By 2013, Zane was successfully managing Sun Valley Hardware. But cracks were appearing in the relationship between his father and his business partner. A separation was agreed upon and the business partner took sole ownership of the store, and Zane found himself without the career he planned on.

However, Zane's family still owned Village Market, a 7,000-square-foot grocery store just down the street from Sun Valley Hardware. The small store was doing well and was continuing to grow. At the end of 2014, Zane went to work with the store manager of Village Market to learn the grocery business. What he found was a completely different retail animal than the hardware store.

As he learned the ropes and joined the Village Market staff, Sun Valley's old partner approached the Watkins family about purchasing Sun Valley Hardware in 2017. The family simply couldn't pass up the opportunity to reclaim the hardware store. This time, Zane joined his father as a co-owner, and they changed the name to Village Hardware. Zane would run the entire Village Hardware operation on his own while his father attended to the family's farm.

The first order of business for the new Village Hardware was to reset the store and get everything cleaned up. After moving the NAPA counter to a more prominent location in the store, Zane walked the store from front to back. He filled a notepad with ideas and sketched out where departments should be for the right customer flow, a skill he refined while working in the grocery store.

As 2020 dawned, Zane had Village Hardware in top shape with an outstanding product selection and an even better staff. When pandemic lockdowns hit, the store's status as an essential business in a small town allowed Zane to rise to the occasion to offer the best selection of products with his new and improved store.

While supply chain issues impacted every industry, Zane had a secret weapon that helped him stay ahead of the competition. If a product wasn't available through Do it Best, he could also leverage the vendors available to him through NAPA and Affiliated Foods—the grocery co-op Village Market buys from. Affiliated Foods carried items such as canning supplies and even power steering fluid while NAPA provided products such as WD-40 and Milwaukee power tools. As a result, Zane was able to stay in stock on most items.

Zane's comprehensive restoration of the family business and its culture has delivered outstanding results. Since his family bought back the store, Zane has increased sales by 72% at Village Hardware. The growth has been both fast and steady. Each month in 2021, sales were up over the previous year, an impressive feat coming off the boost of pandemic-fueled purchases in 2020. Zane raised his margins by 3.2% while increasing the average ticket by 31% and customer count by 28%.

During his time at both Village Hardware and Village Market, Zane has been a strong supporter of local schools, their events and sports teams. To support the agriculture-based community, Zane and the store also contribute to the local chapters of the National FFA Organization and the 4-H. Many times, he helps the youth



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from these organizations see their dreams realized at the New Mexico State Fair and other local events. Zane also brings his passion for music to his local church every Sunday as part of the worship band.

“Being chosen as a Young Retailer of the Year is a high honor. Each year, manufacturers, retailers and wholesalers in the industry join us in celebrating the honorees’ contributions to their communities and the industry,” says Scott Wright, executive director of advanced retail education programs for NHPA. “Zane exemplifies the dedication and innovation that keep our industry growing.”

For more information on the Young Retailer of the Year award program, honorees and more, visit YourNHPA.org/yroty.

About the North American Hardware and Paint Association

Founded in 1900 by a group of retailers, NHPA is a not-for-profit trade association whose mission is to help home improvement, paint and decorating outlets in the U.S. and Canada become better and more profitable retailers. Governed by a board of independent hardware and paint retailers, NHPA fulfills its mission by providing how-to management resources, product discovery, training programs and networking opportunities for the industry it serves. Learn more at YourNHPA.org.

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