



North American Hardware and Paint Association

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Local Entrepreneur Receives 2024 Young Retailer of the Year Award

INDIANAPOLIS—Joel Pletch, store manager of Walkerton Home Hardware in Walkerton, Ontario, was recently named one of the independent home improvement industry's 2024 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 28th 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. Selected from three separate retail categories, honorees are chosen based on a number of criteria, including professional milestones, community engagement, continuing hardware industry education and extracurricular activities.

Sponsors of the 2024 Young Retailer of the Year program include: American Hardware and Lumber Insurance (AHLI), Arrow Fastener, Intertape Polymer Group (IPG), Midwest Fastener, Pony Jorgensen, PPG and The Wooster Brush Company.

"The Young Retailer of the Year program highlights the bright future of the independent channel," says Scott Wright, executive director of advanced retail education programs for NHPA. "It is a privilege to recognize these outstanding young retailers who are making positive impacts in their operations and communities."

The Pletch family has had a long history in farming, and from an early age, Joel knew he wanted to forge a different path. As soon as he was old enough, he got a job at the local grocery store, and that's what sparked his passion for retail. He worked at the store all throughout high school and through the co-op program, attending school half days and working at the store the other half, which allowed him to learn scheduling, ordering and other key retail operations.

Near the end of high school, Joel was dreaming about owning a retail store. Because the grocery store in town was part of a large chain, he knew that dream wouldn't be realized there, so he started exploring other opportunities.



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Joel reconnected with his childhood hockey coach, who owns Walkerton Home Hardware. He joined the staff there part time while still working full time at the grocery store.

After working seven days a week across both operations, he made a choice to focus on hardware and was welcomed into Walkerton Home Hardware full time.

Five years later, at just 23 years old, Joel Pletch is in the process of purchasing the store. Joel has served as store manager of the business for the last five years, and throughout that time, he has committed to growing the business across departments and in unique ways.

With a salesfloor of just 3,300 square feet, Joel has worked diligently over the last five years to grow overall sales and margin by focusing on specific departments and paying attention to the details. In the company's tools category, which includes hand and power tools, power tool accessories and outdoor power equipment, Joel has driven growth 426% since 2018. Another successful category for the business has been outdoor living, which has seen 88% growth since Joel started as store manager. Joel notes strategic merchandising and bringing in impulse items like snacks, barbecue seasonings and cleaning products have allowed them to boost average transaction size by 300%.

Joel's goal is to make Walkerton Home Hardware the place for pros to shop in the community, and he has been persistent in his efforts. Early on in his tenure, Joel started building a contact list of local contractors and tradespeople, and he curated the lists based on their power tool preferences. He asked each person on the list about the products they wanted to see in the store, and he made a concerted effort to respond to those requests.

One greatly successful result of his persistence was a Milwaukee Day event, during which a Milwaukee rep came to the store to showcase tools. Joel pushed the event out to his entire network of over 100 contractors and had donuts, coffee, raffles and giveaways for attendees. The event generated the store's highest single sales day on record, nearly \$22,000, and added pages of special orders for the month.

"I'd like to believe that day we made a bigger name for ourselves and proved that we were the little engine that could," he says.

To familiarize himself with the retail hardware industry, Joel has spent a significant amount of time exploring training and creating unique educational opportunities. He completed over 50 product education courses across hardware categories and in retail operations.

"I've always been adamant that you can learn something new every day, and everyday I'm amazed at all the uncovered secrets that a person can learn in this unique business," Joel says.



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In addition to taking courses, Joel sought knowledge from experts. Starting from the beginning, Joel forged relationships within the industry, starting by connecting with other retailers and industry members on LinkedIn. A chance connection on that social platform allowed him to get an inside look at a successful retail chain.

Joel reached out to retailer Rob Lawrie who owns The Lawrie Group of seven Home Hardware stores in Nova Scotia. Rob was happy to mentor Joel, inviting him to see their operations. Joel says this opportunity has been critical to his development.

“I wish every young person curious about retailing could experience what I have been able to in my short stint of time,” he says.

Joel encourages the same passion for learning and exploring new opportunities in his team. He asks staff to go through the same product knowledge and operations training he completed and encourages them to act on their curiosities in the business.

Being engaged in the community is a priority for Joel, and on the recommendation of another community member, he joined the local Kinsmen Club, a non-profit service organization. The store also donates money and volunteer hours to local organizations and events, including the hospital foundation and family and sporting events.

To ensure he could save enough money to buy the store, Joel also returned to his previous job at the local grocery store as a part-time manager. He says this venture is part of his commitment to making retail his career.

“I’m an all-in retailer. Plain and simple,” he says. “It’s all or nothing, and when it comes to setting myself up for the future I have to be all in.”

Receiving this award has been a goal of Joel’s for several years.

“It’s a huge honor to receive an award like this from NHPA,” he says. “It means the world to be recognized as a young retailer in a growing retail industry. I am so appreciative of everyone who has assisted me along the way in my retail journey thus far.”

The 2024 Young Retailer of the Year honorees will be recognized in a ceremony at the 2024 Independent Home Improvement Conference in Marco Island, Florida on Aug. 28. For more information on the awards program, honorees and more, visit YourNHPA.org/yroty.



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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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