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## **Local Entrepreneur Receives 2026 Young Retailer of the Year Award**

*INDIANAPOLIS, May 8, 2026*—Sean Downey, general manager of West Whittier Paint Co. in Whittier, California, was recently named one of the independent home improvement industry's 2026 Young Retailer of the Year honorees by the North American Hardware and Paint Association (NHPA).

This year marks 30 years of the Young Retailer of the Year program, which 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, and fall into one of three categories: multistore, under \$3 million sales volume and over \$3 million sales volume.

Sponsors of the 2026 Young Retailer of the Year program include: American Hardware and Lumber Insurance (AHLI), ECI Software Solutions, Midwest Fastener and The Wooster Brush Company.

Cody Goeppner, NHPA director of education and training and 2020 Young Retailer of the Year honoree, says the recognition was a turning point for him as it highlighted the hard work he had poured into his career and introduced him to a broader community of passionate, forward-thinking retailers.

"As someone who grew up in my family's hardware store and spent years as a retailer myself, I know firsthand how much heart, grit and innovation it takes to succeed in this industry," Goeppner says. "It truly is full circle and an incredible honor for me to support and celebrate the next generation of leaders. This program shines a spotlight on the people who are shaping the future of independent retail, and based on this year's class, the future is bright."

Like so many independent retailers, Sean grew up in the industry and as soon as he could carry a gallon of paint, he was being put to work in the store. Sean is the fourth generation of the Downey family to run West Whittier Paint Co., which was started by Bob Downey in the 1940s. After Sean graduated from California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, his grandfather, Bill Downey, asked him to come back to the business full-time, and Sean took the chance, returning to the family business.

Transitioning back to the paint business wasn't an easy one for Sean, as the business was still run in an old-school and sometimes outdated way. Sean moved the company to utilize VoIP phones and operate in Microsoft Office, implemented a new POS system, added new payroll software, provided employees with work emails and added WiFi to the store. He learned to use WordPress and built a website, created a new office space, redesigned aisles, added pallet shelving and additional storage space and updated the delivery truck system with vehicle tracking and electronic record keeping.



## North American Hardware and Paint Association

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What he is most proud of is being able to give the employees raises that are more competitive. Sean has also started incentive programs like rewarding good customer service by providing free lunch to all employees when the store receives good reviews. He sees how many of the employees have built long-lasting relationships with their customers that has helped the store become what it is today and wants to recognize those efforts—it has paid off, as the majority of employees have been with the company for at least 10 years with some marking over 20 and 30 years.

On top of all the changes that took place within the store, Bill suffered a life-changing heart attack, leaving Sean to navigate leading the store on his own. As he works to continue evolving the company and encouraging growth, Sean will be focusing on the customer experience. He will lead a facelift of the outside of the store and a reset of the interior. He's also working on an e-commerce site to provide additional exposure to the company online.

When it comes to professional development, Sean prefers to learn by doing, and in his short few years leading the company, he has been doing a lot and learning a lot. Attending the ALLPRO buying events twice a year have also been beneficial to his professional and personal growth. Between the NextGen focused events, roundtable discussions and the general networking that takes place in a group of that size, Sean says those events have been the single most helpful educational tool when it comes to the business.

Staying involved in the community that West Whittier Paint and the Downey family have been a part of for decades is extremely important to Sean. The store donates mistint paints to school groups, monetarily sponsors local organizations and takes part in local car shows.

Humbly, Sean understands that West Whittier Paint is not only a pillar to the community, but an important part of the local economy and makes it his mission to keep the company stable and resilient for the future, with the infrastructure and workforce to grow.

The 2026 Young Retailer of the Year honorees will be recognized as part of the Independent Awards Gala at the 2026 Independent Home Improvement Conference in Orlando on July 29. For more information on the Young Retailer of the Year awards program, honorees and more, visit [YourNHPA.org/yroty](http://YourNHPA.org/yroty).

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