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Container World founders ready to end decades-long business careers

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com 14 hrs ago

Robert and Willanna Ramsey are getting out of their Container World and Ramsey Mobile Home Supplies businesses after 60 years at the same location on the U.S. 31-W Bypass in Bowling Green.

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By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com

Gas station. Mobile home parts supplier. Party supplies store. Balloon decorator. Shelving and organizing consultant and installer. Computer troubleshooter.

A list of the business ventures Robert and Willanna Ramsey have dabbled in over their 60 years in business makes it sound as though they had a hard time getting settled.

In fact, the former high school sweethearts have been, like the shelving products they sell, well-anchored for those six decades. Starting with a Phillips 66 gas station in 1958 – a year after their graduation from Bowling Green High School – the Ramseys have mixed

and matched their business ventures but have always done so from the same location on the bypass where their Ramsey's Mobile Home Supplies and Container World businesses continue to operate.

Now, a business odyssey that has stretched from the heyday of Elvis to the rise of Post Malone is coming to an end. A "for sale" sign is up on Ramsey property encompassing 1.36 acres at 633 and 637 U.S. 31-W By-Pass, and a former employee has bought out the shelving part of Container World.

The Ramseys are joining a growing list of well-established Bowling Green businesses such as Hinton Cleaners and Earl's Hubcap City that have closed shop in recent months.

"We need to start thinking about retiring," Robert Ramsey said Wednesday as he sat in his office at Ramsey's Mobile Home Supplies. "We've had 60 years here and 35 years at Container World. That's a lot."

In an office filled with computer parts, photos, memorabilia of the Ramseys' beloved Western Kentucky University Hilltoppers and a host of artifacts from their businesses, the couple talked about the evolution of their enterprises that have ebbed and flowed to keep pace with business trends.

"My dad had a service station at Eighth and College," recalled Robert Ramsey, 79. "Then we opened a Phillips 66 station when we first came out here. Later, we expanded the warehouse and office and started selling heating oil for mobile homes.

"When the gas companies put natural gas in mobile home parks, we started selling gas furnaces. We got out of the oil business and became a mobile home parts distributor."

As the business grew, Robert Ramsey – who studied math and physics at WKU while running the business – invested in computers to help him stay organized.

"Bob was the first person I knew to have a computer in his office," longtime friend and business associate Gary West said. "It was around 1970. He was on the cutting edge."

Dabbling in computers led to another change in the Ramseys' business.

"I started Ramsey Software and Computer Supplies," Robert Ramsey recalled. "I did software support for customers."

The couple ventured further afield in 1983, when they opened Container World near where the Phillips 66 station had been.

"When he opened Container World, that was somewhat cutting edge," said West, the former executive director of the Bowling Green Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. "He was very adaptive with his businesses."

West and others would soon find out just how adaptive. Selling shelving and containers and doing custom organizing of closets and garages wasn't enough. The Ramseys started selling party supplies out of Container World and eventually got into the business of selling decorative balloons and doing custom balloon decoration. The adjoining enterprises grew to more than 20 employees as the Ramseys expanded their business model.

"Bob was one of the first in the area to come up with balloon decorations," West said. "He did a lot of decorating for events at WKU."

The Ramseys even designed an American flag out of balloons for the visit of President Ronald Reagan to the WKU campus.



Recalling how the balloon venture inflated, Willanna Ramsey said: "On Valentine's Day we'd have to direct traffic out here because we had so many customers."

Things are a bit quieter these days for the Ramsey enterprises as they wind down. The hours for Container World and Ramsey Mobile Homes have been cut back, and arrangements are being made for Container World lead installer David Gammon to take over the shelving business.

Gammon, who spent 10 years at Container World, has already opened Top Shelf Shelving on Dishman Lane and hopes to build on what the Ramseys established.

"One of the advantages is that we already have some established customers," Gammon said. "I have always been appreciative of the Ramseys. They have been really good people to work for.

"I've worked a lot of different places, but I've never had a job I enjoyed as much as Container World. They've been in business for 60 years. To me, that's to be respected."

Another longtime Container World employee, Sharon Kissel, admits to being saddened by the demise of the businesses even though she will stay with the Ramseys and help them manage rental property they own.

"It's sad," said Kissel, who has been with Container World for 20 years. "The business has evolved in different ways, but they (the Ramseys) have stayed true to themselves. They're the sweetest couple. I think they've been together pretty much every minute over all these years."

Now they're together in the effort to find a buyer for the mobile home supplies business and the property so they can enjoy a vacation without worrying about inventory or bookkeeping issues.

West, though, is confident the Ramseys will continue to be visible around Bowling Green.

"One thing I know for certain," he said. "I'll always see them at WKU ballgames."



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