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1958

2008

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## Award Winning Designs Thru the Decades



**Celebrating Over 50 Years of Award Excellence**

2500 N. Ritter Ave., Indianapolis, IN 46218

# THE A-1 AWARDS, INC STORY: 1958-2008



This is a current photo of the new A-1 Awards, Inc. building.

*How many people start out with a dream that lasts for fifty years? Stephen Capper not only has been doing what he started five decades ago, he has never worked for anyone, except his clients. But this story is not about one person, it's about a family that's worked together day after day, serving their clients with creativity and unique recognition programs year after year—over a half century in the same area.*

In 1966, as Interstate 70 was being built, the A-1 Office was moved to its current location. In recent years, the current 25,000 square foot facility was built over and around it.

Perhaps it has been the Midwestern code of dedication and work ethics, coupled with the desire to succeed, and mixed with good fortune and divine guidance. This true story starts in 1958 when this young boy's father came home, as he did for over 37 years of selling insurance. The father looked at his young 12-year-old son with a troubled expression on his pale face.

The father had just returned from a sales call northeast of his home in Indianapolis to Fortville, Indiana. There in this small Midwestern town the father had just seen the son of one of his insured clients, who had become his friend. The son had a newspaper route and was pulling his Red Ryder wagon filled with newspapers behind his bicycle with a rope.

The young boy hit a chuckhole and lost control of his bicycle as it swerved in front of a commercial Robert's Dairy truck. The truck hit the young boy, and he would never walk again; the boy would be confined to sit between two metal wheels for a lifetime. This event had a marked influence on what was about to happen to this family for the next fifty years and beyond.

The father looked at his son and said, "I want you to make me a promise that you will never ride a bike on the road; they are just too dangerous." The boy looked at his father and made the promise that he kept until he was 26 years old. The problem for the young boy was that most of his friends were getting newspaper routes to earn extra money for their young active lives. What was this young ambitious boy going to do to earn his way, if he couldn't do what his peers were doing?

## IT PAYS TO BE DIFFERENT

In the early spring of that year, 1958, the father (L Ert "Rudy" Capper) was appointed to a committee as the award chairman. It was his charge to come up



Stephen Capper as a young boy with his parents. His mother taught him to work, and his father taught him to sell.

with an array of awards for the Indianapolis Charity Horse Show. L Ert Capper visited all of the five trophy dealers in Indianapolis, but none of the shops had anything that appealed to him to present to those coming from all over the country to attend the charity event.

He soon traveled to Chicago, for a life insurance meeting for his business. While he was in Chicago, he visited several trophy stores, collected their catalogs and brought them back to his Indianapolis home.

L Ert brought the catalogs back from Chicago and put them on the glass-top coffee table in front of the family fireplace. There were several catalogs on the table, but this was 1958, and most catalogs were printed in two colors at the most; full color was very unusual. However, one of the catalogs on the coffee table *was* full color; it was only a few pages, but it appealed to the young Stephen, and he picked it up and started to look at it.

In the center of the catalog was a two-page spread that said, "You can be in the Trophy Business for only \$125! Buy our sample kit and receive everything you need to start in business!" Stephen thought this might just be the answer to his young man's dream of having some way to earn extra money—without the newspaper routes his friends had. He went to his father, presented the opportunity and said, "Dad, can I get this special sample kit and start selling trophies to our horse and dog show friends?" After all, the Cappers knew the horse and dog show crowd from all over the country; these two segments were their hobby/business.

His father looked at him and smiled, perhaps because he could see his ambition coming out in his young son. But he said, "Why don't you wait a few years and maybe you can do something like this a little later." With the impatience that comes with inexperience, Stephen said, "Why not now? After all, you don't want me to have a newspaper route, and this might work." L Ert said, "I'll make you a deal. If you can raise the \$125, I will get some business cards printed and help you, but you have to raise the \$125."

## IT HELPS TO HAVE A BANKER

This young boy simply didn't have the \$125—he *was* only 12—and at this point he didn't have any means of making money. But he had hope, because he *did* have a banker, even at his young age. His banker lived with him, and she was at the other end of their home; she was his mother, Florence. Stephen went to her and said,



This picture of Stephen and Nora was taken in February 2005 when Stephen was inducted into the ARA Hall of Fame.



Steve and Nora confer in Steve's office in 1978.



At an early age, Stephen Capper inherited a passion for horses from his father and grandfather that continues to this day.

"Mother, I want to order a sample kit of trophies. Won't that be great? I know you will want me to do it, because I'll be helping people capture their accomplishments with trophies. And after all, mother, I will be home, and I won't have to be out in the cold rain delivering newspapers."

His mother said, "What is this going to cost us?" You need to understand that everything in this family was done together.

Stephen said, "I only need \$120 more." He thought he should put something in the pot. However, this business was just like all other businesses; it always takes more than we think it is going to take. It actually took \$186 by the time a few extra samples were ordered, along with imprinted catalogs, and of course, the C.O.D. fee.

This company selling the sample kit is still in business and is successfully run by two grandsons, Stan Rosenberg and Steve Kite. It was their grandfather who had a manufacturing company by the name of Victory, a division of Planter Incorporated. Stan's father was David Rosenberg, and he was a very creative designer of award and floral product containers. Steve Kite's mother, June, was the daughter and a great business lady who married Bob Kite, a very innovative marketer. They were icons of the awards industry.

The grandfather sent his best salesman, Joe Cooper, to Indianapolis, to investigate this new group that wanted to be a dealer of trophies. Joe arrived, a well-groomed salesman in his brown suit and his trademark manicured nails. Stephen had never seen a man who had manicured nails before. They spent several hours that late afternoon visiting and discussing the possibilities. The salesman called his office in Chicago, and Grandfather Rosenberg talked with Stephen and said, "Now, if we start you, are you going pay me?" Thanks to Joe Cooper, the dream began to become a reality.

#### BIG DOORS SWING ON LITTLE HINGES

The first presentation was on April 25, 1958 at the Marott Hotel (not part of the Marriott chain) located on north Meridian Street in Indianapolis. The American Horse Show Association was having a meeting, and two special gentlemen were attending. One was a Walking Horse Trainer, who had trained in Union City, Indiana. His name was Vic Thompson, and he had just won the World Championship in 1957. The other was Ben Green, a historian of the Walking Horse Breed.

However, the first actual sale, an archery order, came a bit later and was only for a few ribbons; the order was only \$13.10—not much, especially since L Ert drove Stephen to Mooresville, Indiana to the customer's home. Stephen was young, but he had found a ribbon company that would sell him ribbons, and the commission was a full 40%. Of course, Stephen didn't consider the extra expenses, such as shipping costs and travel, but it was a beginning. By the time the ribbons were ordered and paid for, there wasn't much profit, but the business was started and the dream was alive. After all, every journey starts with one step, even a journey of over fifty years.

So much of our world has to do with timing, and at the young age of 12, a sale in the amount of \$13.10 sounded much larger than it was. By today's standards, it might not have captured enough interest for continuing.

#### IS SUCCESS ALWAYS RELATED TO LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION?

Stephen Capper started as a young boy with the help of his parents. He has

always said that his mother taught him how to work and his father taught him how to sell, and that later in life his wife Nora taught him about people.

It was just natural to start this venture in the Capper home, just like so many cottage businesses all over America. Several areas of the home were used for the business. Of course, the actual beginning started on that little coffee table in front of the fireplace. Later on, when Stephen and Nora made a major addition to their present facility, it was important to have fireplaces put in the new office.

The first showroom was the glass-enclosed front porch, which was turned into the office showroom. That little porch, only 9 feet wide and 36 feet long, was so important to this dream. Not only did it start there, but it would be the location of several defining moments in the life of the business as well as Stephen's personal life. The display area was the family's freezer chest, where the trophy samples were laid out on red felt material.

As the business grew, the felt material was replaced with a more elegant piece of wine-colored velvet. Every time that Florence had to get in the freezer, the samples had to be taken off the freezer and put on the floor; in the summertime, they were put on the gas space heater and a small desk. It was a very humble beginning, but no one knew it, because they didn't know any different.

Because of Stephen Capper's youth, he found that it was hard to get those with orders to entrust them to him. He managed to sell plaques and small orders of trophies. He developed most of the selling over the phone, because it is hard to tell someone's age listening over the phone. But those with larger orders looked at the facility (a small house) and Stephen's youth, and when they came to the front porch, they just didn't seem to leave orders.

One group who came from Chicago had heard that this company was doing some hot stamping, and they had a job. These gentlemen were from Master Card, and they needed credit cards



Here, at left, is A-1's new showroom.

Below is the new Board of Directors room, located off of the new showroom.



hot stamped and embossed. They said there would be thousands (of course, it became millions), but the young company just didn't have the facility, people or money to finance the venture. No one knew then how large of an account had just visited the front-porch operation in Indianapolis.



This picture from 1998 shows four generations of A-1 family members.

Daughter Jami shows her expertise at the pantograph as a young teen.



ness or he was headed back to college, and the motivation of the college president lingered in his mind.

#### LANDING THE FIRST BIG ACCOUNT

Stephen decided to make up a sales kit of bowling trophies, and he took off traveling through Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and part of Illinois, setting up bowling alleys with trophies. He was successful with an amazing percentage of his sales calls, but

the problem was that he wasn't selling the bowling proprietors what they could in turn sell to the bowlers.

He just didn't have enough knowledge of what the bowlers wanted. He was selling kits and making a profit, but without the resale, nothing was growing. This was just not producing enough steady income, and it was beginning to look more like the halls of college would be calling.

Stephen had developed a procedure of selling over the phone. It became almost a science by timing the time of day that he would contact his prospects and setting up appointments with them. Usually, he would start calling in the early evening, sometimes continuing until past midnight, making calls to the West Coast where it was still earlier. He then would send them a catalog made of 8 x 10 photos of product along with actual samples.

He also developed another selling process: his traveling road show. He would contact prospects and make arrangements to set up in major cities at a motel. He and his father would travel north to Madison, Wisconsin, south to Atlanta, Georgia, east to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and west to Iowa.

He traveled in style, in an Olson step van that was converted to carry the trophy samples. The van was actually an old bread truck they found in a junkyard and had painted and retrofitted for their purposes. He found two red leather bucket seats in a junkyard and had them put in the step van so it would ride better. He used Ramada Inns whenever he could because they were normally built with windows that were low to the ground,

and he could unload his samples through the windows; it was much easier.

He would ask for a studio room, move the bed up against the wall and then bring in his own tables and samples. He set his appointments every three hours, which gave him time to show the product and write up the order. He had a large, two-ring clipboard that was painted bright cherry red; he started in the early spring with the goal of filling the clipboard before he slowed down—that meant he had enough orders to get him through the summer.

But it was getting late in the year and Stephen realized that he needed major orders. He thought that the only way to do it quickly would be to bid on state business. After making a few calls, he decided to visit the Indiana State Fair, where he met a lady named Mrs. Cottey. With black hair and wearing a bright red dress, she met him with a smile at the doorway of the entry department.

She said, "We have five different contracts," and she told him about each of them. As Stephen was preparing to leave, Mrs. Cottey asked him which contract he was interested in. He replied, "All of them." She said, "I would suggest you leave the ribbon contract alone, because we have been buying from the same man for 16 years, and that one might be very hard for you to get." But Stephen said, "Well, please send all of them to me anyway, and I will look them over." The ribbon order, as it turned out, was by far the largest dollar volume; it was more than all the others put together.

Stephen's father had agreed to go with him to make the presentation, since at that time he didn't have any experience making a sale in front of several people. However, L Ert had an emergency gallbladder operation, which was much more involved in 1966 than it is today, and he was released from the hospital only two days before the presentation. L Ert began the presentation, but almost immediately related his unexpected operation and explained that his son was going to present the quotation.

Stephen started by asking the board, "Do you know the thread count of your ribbon, and here's an even greater question, does your present supplier know the thread count of your ribbon?" This one

question did one thing; it brought up a question that no one could answer, not even the supplier of 16 years. It wasn't the fact that the thread count was important, but the fact that the other salesman lost some of his credibility.

After the various vendors made their presentations, the president of the fair board stood up and said, "Folks, we have decided not to vote today; we are going to have two vendors back tomorrow—the vendor of sixteen years and this new young man Capper located here in Indianapolis. The other three vendors are dismissed; we appreciate your interest. You are invited to stay or you may go home." One of the vendors decided to stay, and the other two went home.

With the afternoon off, Stephen went to the accounting office and then by to visit Mrs. Cottey again. In her office, all the old, unused ribbons from past fairs were stored. He looked at the Swine Department ribbons and discovered a box of about 20 rosette ribbons that said the same thing on every ribbon: Grand Champion Duroc Boar Indiana State Fair—with no date.

Stephen turned to Mrs. Cottey and asked her, "If we get the order, are we to make this many rosettes for this division?" When she looked at the rosettes in the box, her face got as red as the dress she was wearing the first time Stephen met her. She immediately excused herself and took the box downstairs to the executive director. You see, there can only be one Grand Champion Duroc Boar of any fair; the "good 'ole boy" that had been their ribbon supplier was selling them more than they needed, padding the bill to the tune of several thousand dollars a year. The next morning, the board awarded the ribbon contract to Stephen.

The next week Stephen went to the Kentucky State Fair; they'd had a different supplier for the past eight years. This presentation was much different, because it was a Commonwealth State. The committee read the bids, and A-1 had the best bid, but didn't have the required vendor number on the bid. Stephen said he would get it, but the director said, "You must have it today."

Stephen said, "Okay, we will get it."

The director explained that it wasn't that easy, because the process normally

took several weeks. Stephen asked if they got the number and got back before closing if they would get the order.

The director smiled and said, "Yes."

Stephen and L Ert drove to Frankfort, Kentucky, and found a lady who helped them, and they returned at 3:50 with 10 minutes to spare. The number was accepted, and he got the business. In less than a month's time, he had acquired over \$140,000 worth of business. He was on his way. His father said, "Stephen, you just might make it."

#### TRYING A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT IDEAS TO BE DIFFERENT

A-1 has developed a lot of products during their fifty years; some were creative and others were from necessity. Among those items were columns made with adhesive wallpaper that the clients loved because they were different. They perfected the creation of insert molding of small decorative pieces, such as their patent applied button for their rosettes.

They could produce 16 of these buttons every 16 seconds. Later on, they created the slant wood column in 48" lengths, where inserts were applied with logos. A-1 used particleboard plaques where the edges looked like they had wormholes in them. To combat this problem, they mixed cornstarch with paint to fill the holes, and for years they wholesaled these on a regular basis to over 60 retail trophy stores.

Earlier we told you about the glass-enclosed front porch and just how important it was to this family and the business. One day in the early summer, a lady called and said she needed some awards and wanted to set an appointment to come in and set up a program. She arrived on time and asked for Stephen; they had to go out to the back and get him; he was riding a horse and had forgotten about the appointment. That would have been the worst day of his life if he had missed that appointment. When he walked into the little front porch office, he met Nora, who would become his best friend and wife 17 months later.

Nora held a very successful position with a national clothing company. When they were first married, everyone thought Stephen and the award business



This family photo was taken in 2000.

#### THE MOTIVATION TO GET THE BUSINESS GOING

By 17, Stephen had graduated from high school. He had loved his high school experience, and a lot of great things had happened. He was already an accomplished orator, and was selected as one of the five best speakers in high schools in Indiana. The final result was that he, like his father, was the graduation speaker—at the same high school.

But now it was time for college, and on the first day, Stephen was motivated in a manner he had not anticipated when the president of the university said, "Look at the person to your left—they likely won't be here by Thanksgiving, and the person on your right—they likely won't be here by Christmas, and if you don't focus, you won't be here by Easter." That was the first motivational speech Stephen had ever heard—it motivated him to get out of school.

After nearly two years, Stephen told his father he wanted to take some time off and decide what he wanted to do. His father wasn't exactly happy with what he was hearing, but he asked a question, "If you take off for one year and you can't make this trophy business enough of a business, then you will return to school, okay?" Stephen agreed, then for the remainder of the summer, he did very little to develop the business, but as fall came he realized he was going to have to get some major busi-



Zech, one of Steve & Nora's eight grandsons, learned to work at an early age. Zech is now 21 and working at A-1.

One of five fireplaces in the new building, this one is in the new showroom.



were doing really well because they were taking so many trips. The fact was that, of the 25,000 employees of the clothing company, Nora was consistently recognized number one in the nation and won trips and gifts constantly.

Soon after they were married, Nora was asked to come to Cleveland and bring Stephen with her. Nora was offered New York City, but she said she and Stephen would talk about it and let them know. Nora decided not to accept the position, and a few years later she joined Stephen to expand the award business together. It was a good thing she decided not to accept the position, because a few years later the original principals died and the company went under.

Since that time, A-1 Awards, Inc. has grown, and Nora has implemented many procedures, policies and forms that have taken the company to another level. Before Nora joined the firm, Stephen used a *corner filing system*: one corner of his office was accounts payable, another was accounts receivable and yet another was correspondence. It was difficult and unorganized at best, but he *could* sell, and this team worked together to grow the business to a level neither had dreamed possible.

From the time their daughters Toni and Jami were eight and two, respectively, both have been active in the business—Toni using a New Hermes manual engraver, and Jami taking figures out of

the plastic bags. Today the sisters have their offices next to one another with a window between them; they orchestrate the ordering of product, sales and management of the day-to-day operation, as well as the marketing and the overall management of A-1 Awards, Inc.

Even though the sisters, who Stephen has named The Instigators, have different talents, they work together and cover for each other in and out of the office. Stephen says they have both always understood their undefined positions with the company. They just grab hold of the moment and get the job done. They have the full support of their parents, and they perform daily. They are best friends, and each of their families work together as they vacation together and pick up each other's kids (the Cappers have eight grandsons).

The sons-in-law both contribute to the business; Toni's husband, Martin, spearheads special projects. He has an Engineering Degree that helps in troubleshooting and developing procedures for new equipment. Jami's husband, Gary, has an education in Robotics, and he keeps the networking computer system, the extended phone system and the security system updated.

In these few pages, it would be impossible to tell the complete story of this family business. For fifty years, the company has survived many trials and tribulations—along the way achieving great success. There are many other stories: buying property for the business, buying a house for the business and moving it to the property, and then building on until the facility reached its current 25,000 square feet.

There aren't many companies in any industry that survive fifty years. It takes hard work, dedication and special help from good employees, coupled with loyal clients and the help of God. The next generation's challenge is to take A-1 Awards, Inc. to another level, but it's unlikely they'll forget the past—it has been a great trip so far. Four generations have been involved with the dream, and it took everybody to get the dream this far.

If you are ever in Indianapolis, stop by and visit with the Capper family. Their door is always open.

A&E



Jim, a long-time employee, is operating the injection molder.