

Smith a class act

Posted on June 6, 2013 by Brian Lazzuri editor@thecasket.ca



Antigonish businessman and philanthropist Steve Smith joined some illustrious company last week as he entered the Junior Achievement (JA) Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame. The inductions for Smith, Willet J. and Hugh O. Mills and Joe Randell took place during the 20th annual JA banquet in Halifax May 29.

Smith was surprised and humbled by the recognition.

“It is an honour to be joining such a prestigious group of Nova Scotia entrepreneurs,” Smith said. “I never imagined that this would happen to me.”

A video montage introducing Smith to the hundreds of people who gathered with junior achievers, noted how the businessman began by selling wood stoves with his brother out of their parents’ garage. S & D Smith Central Supplies Ltd. is now one of the largest building supply companies east of Montreal.

Along the way, Central has been acknowledged as the business of year by both the Pictou and Antigonish Chamber of Commerce, Best Large Surface Retailer in Canada at the Outstanding Retailer Awards hosted by Hardware Merchandising Magazine and is known throughout Nova Scotia for its support of local communities.

Antigonish businessman Brian MacLeod spoke in the video about his friend's commitment to community.

"It is not all about Steve, it is about what he can do for his community, what he can do for those around him, what he can do for his family," MacLeod said.

He said Smith also illustrates a depth and understanding of his business. Using an example of walking into a Central store, MacLeod said Smith not only knows the 60,000 items for sale, their use and where they are made but also everybody who works for him.

"He is personally asking about their family and is aware of who they are and where they came from," MacLeod said.

He also noted that the provincial community should be proud of someone like Smith whose business operates in a rural area yet builds a top quality product it can market successfully.

"Someone said to me once if you can make it in a place like Toronto you're doing pretty well," MacLeod said. "If you can make it in an area like Halifax, well that is exceptional. But if you can make it Antigonish, you can probably make it in hell because you are so far out of the way."

Smith spoke about his methods of success while offering advice to the junior achievers.

"We know you have learned a great deal through JA but I can tell you your learning has just begun," Smith said. "After 37 years in business, I feel I am just a freshman."

He asked the junior achievers to further their education, to take it seriously and to implement what they learn in life in what they do.

"Don't take a course for credit but rather see how it can improve your life, or your career," Smith said.

He also encouraged them to be ambitious and give their all in every job no matter how menial it seems at the time.

"Don't be afraid to express your ideas to your employer," Smith said. "You will be noticed and build lasting relationships. Your employer's recommendations will be valuable to you in the future."

As for the budding entrepreneurs in the room, Smith suggested that they create businesses that can make a positive difference in other people's lives.

"You have to be passionate about your choice so the hours that you spend, and there will be a lot, don't feel like work."

A part of that passion should be a willingness to take some risks and get past the fact that others will tell you that it can't be done. Smith said he relied on his own advisors and board members and persevered against those who said something could not be done. He did this using gut instinct, doing what he thought would work and making it happen.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help, it will surprise you about the help advice people will give you," he said.

Smith acknowledged those who helped him along the way including his wife Kathy, parents Miriam and Stillman, children Adam, Patrick and Meghan; and the 650 Central associates many of which have been with the company for more than 30 years.

He spoke about the importance of surrounding himself with good people and trusting them to carry out the tasks assigned. Smith said that selling a pound of nails is as important as selling a whole household of supplies.

"Build a reputation on trust and treat every customer, big or small, with respect," Smith advised. "Ingrain these values in your associates as well. You will develop loyal customers who will make a lasting difference to your business."

He also spoke about his and Central's support of the local communities.

"Give back to the communities that support you. It is ingrained in my company's philosophy to support the communities where we do business and to take a leading role so others will follow suit."

Another key philosophy is Central's relationships with Nova Scotia and Maritime businesses. Smith said Central has a strong policy of doing business locally noting 90 per cent of Central's lumber comes from Nova Scotia woodlots. Equating to almost 20 million board feet, the policy means supporting hundreds of Nova Scotians who work in forests, mills and as truckers.

"It truly makes a difference to our province as 100 per cent of the mills we support are still in business today, after a five year downturn that saw over 50 per cent of saw mill jobs lost in Nova Scotia," Smith said.

"Please try to buy your products and services as close to home as possible. It will make a huge difference in keeping our people here."

Source: The Casket <http://www.thecasket.ca/archives/29400>