

‘Worthwhile Work—YOU MATTER’

Bret Tangley is a third-generation Culligan dealer who's well-known throughout the water treatment and conditioning industry. He's been dedicated to the WQA for nearly 30 years. "Yes, I have been very active in the association," he said. "At one time, it felt like I had a permanent board seat!" Tangley served 11 years on the board of directors and many more on committees, task forces and sections. He is a Master Water Specialist and frequent presenter around the nation on a wide range of water and operational topics. Tangley has received numerous industry awards for his service.

"My dad, Peter, and John Packard were business partners for more than 25 years. In 1990, I was just getting out of college and starting in the business. One of the things they spoke to me about was how I would keep developing and growing my skills, contacts and knowledge of the business. John was particularly involved in WQA at the time and they encouraged me to go to meetings, get on committees, raise my hand and get involved. That proved to be an awesome opportunity to learn from others in the industry (whether dealers, customers or manufacturers/suppliers) and grow terrific relationships, lifelong friendships and knowledge. Frankly, my career would not be as enriched and our business would not be as good without WQA."

It all started in the spring/summer of 1949. "My grandparents, W. Sterling and Mae Josephine Tangley, were running a general store in Northfield, MN when a traveling salesman walked in. He was a traveling salesman selling Culligan franchises. My grandfather was an entrepreneur, so he took a look at this new opportunity and subsequently purchased a Culligan franchise of 10 accounts. They sold their general store, traded their family car for a truck and moved their family to Ellsworth, WI—and the business has grown steadily ever since. My grandfather would sell in the evenings, deliver and install in the daytime, while my grandmother did the billing and bookkeeping and raised their family. Every week they had to grow customers to survive. They did it one customer at a time. My grandfather lived to be 90 before passing in 2001. My grandmother was the matriarch of our family business and lived to celebrate our 69th year before passing in early September of this year, at age 97½. We miss her terribly but also celebrate the long and wonderful life that she lived and what became of their humble beginnings.

"My dad grew up in the business. He was finishing college about the time Grandpa was starting to lose interest. My dad was there to pick it up and grow it. My parents went out and found their own opportunities and bought a couple of franchises of their own. My mother Karol

By Donna Kreutz

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worked tirelessly in the office on accounts receivable and payable, customer service, collections, all those things while raising our family. My grandmother and mother played a terrifically valuable role in support of the business in a different way than my dad and grandfather."

Peter's son Bret was immersed in the water business from the time he was five-years old. "I literally grew up on the truck. I rode with my dad, rode routes with our delivery personnel and service technicians. I knew the customers. I got a real appreciation for the heart and soul of the business." As a teenager, he worked summers and breaks during high school and college, selling free trials of bottled water door-to-door in business parks, doing relief routes and anything else that needed to get accomplished. Later, he worked alongside some of those long-time employees with whom he rode as a child. "I have performed all aspects of the business. There is not a role in the company that I have not experienced." Since 2005, he has been the President of Sterling Water, officially purchasing it from his parents in 2008. "This is very worthwhile work that makes people's lives better. It feels rewarding. There's a lot of joy in improving people's lives. It's hard not to get excited about that."

So what's changed and what's stayed the same over seven decades? Tangley said: "What has stayed the same (to me) has been that you really need to be committed to your customers and your employees, to really care about getting the customer results, the things they want and need. That's not changed. We've really worked hard to do that. And the importance of an appreciative employee environment has not changed. You have to be open, committed, true to your employees and the people who work with you. We provide an enriching environment where their efforts and energies are rewarded with opportunities." Tangley's long-time mantra is: You matter.

"Most everything else has changed. One of the most notable things is the pace at which change happens. Everything is fast and you really need to be on alert to a changing landscape. I also think it's harder to find and engage with consumers amidst the myriad of messages in the market today. It seems more difficult to earn people's trust, to get a relationship going and for people to be trusting and confident with their decisions. Another notable factor is that people are living and building in areas where the water quality is not very good and new contaminants present themselves. Awareness of the importance of quality water is increasing from all the media messages surrounding the health impacts or environmental impacts of various contaminants. Last and certainly not least, the competitive landscape is changing markedly, with many

more competitors and not just in the region but nationally, internationally or from the Internet.”

Sterling Water’s hallmarks are exemplary customer service, expert water professionals and affordable water treatment solutions. The company owns and operates four Culligan dealerships: in Eau Claire, Rothschild and Waupaca in northern Wisconsin, plus Sauk Center in central Minnesota. “Our dealerships are locally run by employees who are part of the communities they serve. All are completely full-service providers of water treatment products and related services, including bottled water, for residential, commercial and industrial applications. We also operate a full-scale bottled-water production facility in Rothschild and ultrapure deionization regeneration facilities in Eau Claire and Waupaca.

“We serve primarily rural areas, so we have a lot of private wells and address a lot of problem water. It’s a very important part of our customer portfolio. Hardness, high iron in various forms and low pH are the biggest water challenges, but in the last few years we have seen a rise in the influence of nitrates, arsenic, tannins/organics and sulfur as well. One of the things I think is going to happen in the near future is consumers will stop taking water quality for granted, believing that it’s good today and will always be that way. A lot of people who are homeowners seem to be under the impression that someone will show up to inform them if their water quality is compromised. That’s not necessarily the truth. It is important to test your water with a reputable resource and truly get the facts about what’s in that

water. Do this annually. We want people to appreciate the fact that they have a choice when it comes to their water. Knowing what’s in the water will be even more important tomorrow than it is today and next year and beyond. The demand for quality

water is increasing and the impurities are not going away either.

“Critical challenges for the industry are the ability to attract and retain high-quality employees, especially sales personnel, followed by our ability to generate new customer leads and create a desire by consumers to treat their municipal water supply. Our corporate plans for the next five to 10 years include continuing to work to grow the business and expand our penetration in the market—to get more and more people to experience the benefits of using and drinking better water. There are so many folks who still don’t incorporate that into their life and that makes for an exciting future.”

It’s too early to tell if there will be a fourth generation running Sterling Water. Tangley and wife Tonja’s three children are too young to make career decisions just

yet. “Yes it would be terrific but it’s too early to say. I am really glad I made the decision to get into the family business and this industry. I did not always think this is what I would do. I now clearly understand why it was so important to my parents and grandparents, why it meant so much to them. This is a wonderful, clean business with a lot of nice people. It’s very rewarding to help people with something noble that really makes a difference in the quality of their lives, with something as critical, simple and important as water.” ♦



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