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“We were happy to do a piece on such a well-respected and well-liked member of the propane industry.” Scott Jeffrey

PROFILE

Bob Bush Bids Adieu...

As of March 15, 2010 the term of his contract with Canwest Propane Partnership officially winds down after nine productive, interesting and enjoyable years.

And at precisely 8:10 a.m. the next day, Bob Bush will join a select crew of cronies on a flight bound for Phoenix, with a week of golf on the agenda.

Immediately upon his return to Calgary, the winner of the 2009 Propane Gas Association of Canada (PGAC) President's Award climbs aboard another plane, heading for Hawaii in the company of Diana, his wife of almost 50 years.

Sounds a lot like retirement, doesn't it? You might think so. But Bob Bush isn't so sure. The company he has served so diligently for almost a decade is moving into a new and aggressive phase of growth, and that's the kind of strategic move that gets his juices flowing.

“I'm open and have a desire to continue working for a further period of time. The company will determine whether I'll continue to do any additional consulting work for them. Others in our industry have also suggested there could be two-way merits in doing some work with them. I still find myself waking every morning around 6, wanting to be involved some way or another with propane and its people,” says Mr. Bush, who doesn't expect that to change.



Bob Bush (right), with Dawn Baker and Joe Sternola, at the PGAC's 2008 Welcome Reception in Kananaskis.

After a lifetime in sales and management, the 72-year-old, perennially active within the professional association, has spent the past year or so as a full-time consultant with Canwest, which has included providing input to update Canwest's health, safety and environmental policy manual with that of its parent company, Gibson Energy, while representing corporate interests in PGAC emergency response capabilities, along with standards issues, both federally and provincially.

As one of the most highly esteemed people within the \$9-billion Canadian propane industry, as well as a tireless advocate for the product, Bob Bush stands behind propane the way other people stand behind their religion. He's a true believer and it still gets his goat that this clean, inexpensive and highly efficient natural gas/crude oil byproduct remains an underrated Rodney Dangerfeld of the energy industry.

"You don't hear much about propane, unless you're at a barbecue," Mr. Bush nods a little ruefully. "It doesn't get the respect. I like propane because it's a good, clean, economical, efficient fuel that certainly takes care of a lot of applications."

Respect is a commodity Mr. Bush has earned in bushels throughout a lengthy business career, which had its roots in his native turf of southeastern British Columbia. Just ask the man who hired him nine years ago, Sam van Aken, senior decision-maker for Canwest, Canada's second-largest propane distributor.



Bob Bush's wife Diana and MP Justin Trudeau at last year's Ottawa Propane Government Day Reception, hosted by the PGAC.



Bob Bush, flanked by PGAC President Ann Marie Hann and PGAC Chair Dan McPhee, was the 2009 recipient of the President's Award – Individual.

"Sometimes it seems that Bob's been on every advisory board there is. His contributions have been enormous. He's a great resource for all of us. With his knowledge and experience, he's a terrific sounding board," Mr. van Aken enthuses.

Great Resource

Originally from the smelter town of Trail, B.C., Bob still remembers paying two bits for standing room tickets to watch hockey's fabled Smoke Eaters as well as toiling through the summers for the town's primary employer, then known only as Cominco. "If your dad worked for Cominco, you were virtually guaranteed a summer job," he says.

Those hard-working summers put some welcome spending loot in his pocket as well as reinforcing the youthful conviction that his future lay elsewhere. After graduating from high school, Mr. Bush gravitated to the architecture program at the University of British Columbia, before switching gears and moving into the education faculty. "Then I started to get the feeling that I probably wasn't cut out to be teaching children, but would rather be teaching and guiding people" he recalls, before finding his way into the sales department of ESCO Limited, a manufacturer of high-quality steel products where he'd been working summers while attending UBC.

He wound up hanging around for 15 years, eventually transferred to Calgary in 1970 as the company broadened its horizons as a supplier for the fledgling oilsands, as well as the pipeline, construction and aggregate industries.

But as things evolved, a punishing travel schedule caused the family man to look around for alternatives. "I was travelling for seven weeks in every nine. My kids were starting to call me uncle," he jokes. His solution was to hook up with a company, Allied Equipment and Rental, which had served as an ESCO dealership. In time, Mr. Bush jumped ship to join Allied, which introduced him to the propane business, through one of their sister companies.

And by 1982 he'd been promoted to the vice-presidency of Cal-Gas Inc., working under a longtime businessman and mentor, Jack Anderson. Although the pair eventually wound up at odds (more later), Mr. Bush readily concedes that his ex-boss taught him an enormous amount about the business world and the need to participate in industry associations during their long professional association.

People Make the Difference

In the end, they parted ways after Mr. Bush established a new branch of the company in Thunder Bay. It's an episode that neatly illustrates how both risk and reward tend to manifest themselves in the business he loves.

Eager to recruit potential mining clients in the Hemlo region of northwest Ontario, the new branch quickly landed a plum contract: supplying heating fuel to a large mining operation in the area.

That's where the reward factored in: Cal-Gas was able to snatch the job away from the same rival supplier which had beaten them to the punch on a major forestry contract out in B.C. "Competition has been a big part of the fun and excitement of the business, a little like a card game. You win some, you lose some," he says with a grin.

The risk? That rolled out a bit later. As it happened, Cal-Gas nailed the major mining project a tad too early in the game, before the necessary railway infrastructure and storage had been put in place for their Ontario operations.

"We had some hiccups," he recalls now, understating the case. "This was a large client that consumed from 15 million to 18 million liters of propane a year, and we weren't really ready." All of a sudden, the temperature fell to near record lows, and Bob envisioned the newspaper headlines to read "more than 900 miners out of work due to mine shafts and structures freezing shut from lack of propane fuel."

"We were able to truck in the fuel they needed initially but only in limited volumes," says Mr. Bush.

"Obviously, we had to bring in rail cars but the rail facility wasn't finished yet."

Long story short, Cal-Gas was ultimately able to meet its obligations, running product by truck from as far away as Sarnia, Winnipeg and Regina before the rail line kicked in. But naturally, costs for the project blew the budget sky-high.



"I still find myself waking ever morning around 6, wanting to be involved some way or another with propane and its people," Says Bob Bush.

That led to "a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication," Mr. Bush recalls. "The boss started wondering about some of these numbers as they came in. He wondered if I'd been upfront about how high our costs would be and I thought maybe he'd suffered a memory loss."

That's pretty much how Mr. Bush and Mr. Anderson came to a parting of the ways after a 30-year friendly, rewarding business relationship.

As he remembers it, Bob left Cal-Gas on a Thursday afternoon in June 2001. The following Monday morning, he reported for duty at Canwest and never looked back. (Bob's first day on the new job was to participate in a Gibson/Canwest Customer Appreciation Day Golf Tournament that he had previously been invited to as a customer of Gibson's).

Whether or not his official retirement actually "takes," only time will tell. It seems a long shot that he'll never lose interest in the propane industry.

"It's a running joke that we've tried to find an issue of Propane Canada that doesn't have a picture of Bob Bush in it," laughs his current boss, Sam van Aken. "I think we found one issue in 2004. We kid him but it just goes to show, Bob takes part in every industry function there is."

But the biggest reason Mr. Bush will always be part of the propane community, and why it has been his lifeblood, is the people. "People make all the difference," he says with a smile.