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Gifts For Individuals, A SECOND CAREER

Story by Kris Wieber • Photography by Roger Popwell



Top: Ned stands with wife Mary in the showroom of Gifts For Individuals. Above: In addition to personalized gifts, a wide variety of awards and promotional products are offered by Gifts For Individuals, including the acrylics shown here.

Started on July 1st, 1985, Gifts For Individuals is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Located in O'Fallon, Illinois, the business is owned and operated by Ned Drolet, a man who began his 20-year career in the awards industry after retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force after a 23-year career.

BEFORE THE BUSINESS

Drolet enlisted in the Air Force as a young man and was in the military for three and a half years before getting his commission, and, like many military men, he did quite a bit of traveling throughout his career.

He went to basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, then went to technical school at Keesler AFB MS, to become a ground radio operator. From there, Drolet went to the Philippines and applied for a program that would enable him to become

a commissioned officer. He was accepted into the program, and the Air Force sent him back to the U.S. where he finished his undergraduate degree at Colorado State University (he already had more than two years of college).

After a year and a half at CSU, Drolet went to OTS and earned his commission. From there, he went to Sheppard AFB TX, to attend a data automation technical school. The Air Force continued to move him around, assigning Drolet to Moody AFB in Valdosta, Georgia, to Langley AFB in Virginia and to several other bases. Somewhere in there, Drolet managed to obtain his MBA at Louisiana Tech University. Drolet also completed a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam.

Scott AFB, near O'Fallon, was the last place the military moved Drolet. But before stationing him there, they sent him overseas one last time.

"I was in Tehran, Iran when the Shah was deposed and Khomeini came into the country. Things fell apart, and soon we all left. That's when I was reassigned to Scott AFB," says Drolet.

Originally, Drolet and his family were going to be in Iran for two years. "We arrived in September 1977, and the family left Christmas 1978. I left in March 1979. We arrived in O'Fallon in '79, and I retired in '85. That was the longest I was stationed in any one place."

However, the military did try to move Drolet one last time.

"I was tired of moving. I told them I'd do whatever they wanted me to do at Scott AFB, but I was not going to move away."

Of his military career, Drolet says, "It was fun and I enjoyed it, but when I retired, it was time to move on and try something different. A lot of guys retire and end up working for the military as a contractor. I didn't want to do that." Instead, Drolet started Gifts For Individuals.

Drolet says when he was approaching retirement, he knew he didn't want to commute to St. Louis every day (the nearest large city to O'Fallon).

"I always liked the idea of having my own business some day. If retirement from the Air Force was not the right time, then when would it be the right time? Throughout my 23-year Air Force career, we



were always purchasing awards for people who were leaving or retiring. Scott AFB obtained many of their awards in St. Louis. I felt that a closer source could provide better service. Also, Kathy, my wife's sister, sold advertising specialties in Kansas City. After talking with Kathy, I felt that a place where people could get engraved and imprinted items in any quantity was something the local community lacked and could support if such a business existed."

When working on a name for the business, Drolet originally wanted to call it Go For It! However, while Go For It may have been a good state-of-mind statement, it was not very descriptive of what he envisioned the business becoming.

"So, using the letters GFI, the business name Gifts For Individuals was created. The reasoning being was that what we do—whether recognizing a single person or helping a business say thank you to their customers—is personalize our products in some way. We do not simply sell generic, off-the-shelf items," says Drolet.

O'FALLON, ILLINOIS

Living, owning and operating a business in O'Fallon has been a rewarding experience for Drolet.

He notes that, "Our town has grown rapidly since we opened our current loca-



Above: Gifts For Individuals is located in O'Fallon, Illinois, very near the last place Ned was stationed, Scott AFB. Left: The staff of Gifts For Individuals, back row, left to right, Ned and Mary, Barb Guebert and Bob Gero, Front row: Janet McKeon, Tina Sheffer, Robin Rainey and Dianne Trippensee.

tion in January 1989, and our business has grown and matured with the community. It is satisfying to feel you are providing a service to the city and community in which you live."

O'Fallon's population was 15,000 when Drolet was first stationed at Scott AFB. It is now 25,000.

"The whole area is just popping. People who live in St. Louis have found themselves going so far west for housing that they're now coming east across the great Mississippi River," says Drolet.

In addition to running Gifts For Individuals, Drolet has been very involved in O'Fallon's community, working with a variety of organizations.

One of them was called the Downtown

Merchant's Association (now the Main Street Program), of which he was president for a couple of years. He has also been involved in Rotary; he was president of the local club in 1995-96 and was heavily involved in the city's Chamber of Commerce, being the COC president for two years.

For the past eight years, Drolet has been a city alderman and was recently re-elected on April 5th to another four-year term. Being involved in the community has been fun for Drolet, and it has helped his business.

PERSONALIZATION PROCESSES

By offering promotional products, Gifts For Individuals can get just about anything personalized for their customers by

Barb talks to a client about a promotional products program.

a variety of means. However, the business offers a healthy in-house selection.

They have two Universal M-300 45-watt laser systems, and they also offer sublimation, using Sawgrass's Sublijet IQ inks with their Epson Stylus C-82 printer and Epson Stylus C-84 printer with a bulk ink system. And, "believe it or not, we still use an Apple Laser Writer II for single-color sublimation."

They have a variety of heat presses, including a Geo Knight DK20S 16" x 20" digital swinger, a Geo Knight Model 294 swinger, a MugXpress 200 and a Geo Knight Hat Press.

"We do sublimation and laser engraving every day. I would say we do more sublimation onto Unisub metal than any other substrate; we then mount the metal onto a plaque. We also do a lot of nameplates and mugs," says Drolet. "Recently, we started to engrave bricks as a fundraiser for the local high school."

Although Gifts For Individuals uses each process on a daily basis, Drolet says that laser engraving is where the business is growing and now contributes the most to their awards sales.

Drolet notes that, "We make quarterly awards for the military, trophies for a local racetrack and shadow boxes for individuals. Also, as an ad specialty distributor, we provide promotional items to numerous businesses."

TECHNOLOGY'S IMPACT

Drolet says that aside from the fact he has offered ad specialties from the start, developing technology has played a major part in Gifts For Individuals' evolutionary process.

"The Epson printers allowed us to offer color sublimation. Before, we could only offer single-color sublimation using our Apple Laser Writer. Likewise, the development and reduced cost of the new laser engravers—along with the explosion of products offered for them—made the diversification to offer laser engraving a natural progression. And when we replaced our Internet dial-up service with DSL last year, it led to the development of our website, www.giftsforindividuals.com."

Technology continues to keep pushing things forward. Drolet says, "Every time I feel like I'm catching my breath and I



understand what's happening, technology dictates I need to continue to increase our product line and improve on how we take care of our customers. At one time, we thought it was great to have a fax. Then, it was email."

Now, Drolet says he is working to get his website set up so that his customers can, using the Internet, order directly from Gifts For Individuals and his suppliers. "People will be able to click right on the webpage and then tell us or our supplier what they want. We've had customers who have left the area, and this will enable us to still provide support to them even though they can't come into the store. We will have enough on the website for them to browse through."

EMPLOYEES

Drolet has eight employees working at Gifts For Individuals, many of whom have been working for him for many years.

Dianne Trippensee, manager of the store's awards section, has been with the company the longest, since May 1991. "She is an outstanding artist and people person and professionally lays out and arranges the numerous shadow boxes we are known for. Several examples can be seen on our website," says Drolet.

Drolet says that Janet McKeon is their accounting guru and is the backbone of the ad specialties section. She has been with Gifts For Individuals since September 1993.

Tina Sheffer, the assistant manager for the awards section, was hired in July 1997. She is also the chief laser machine operator and resident picture-framing expert.

"Two of our awards employees, Bob Gero and Robin Rainey, were steady customers of ours. We felt they would be perfect for us, and they have been," says Drolet. They are the

whatever-needs-to-be-done guys, waiting on customers, answering the phone, doing setups, running the engravers, unpacking shipments, etc.

Barb Guebert has been with Gifts For Individuals since February 2002 and is their ad specialty expert. "One day I met Barb in an associate's office and mentioned to her that if she ever wanted a job change to contact me. As luck would have it, she contacted me and came on board just as another employee, Shirley, who had been with us for 10 years, decided to retire after over 30 years in the industry," says Drolet.

He adds that, "In April 2002, my lovely wife Mary, who retired from a civil service job, began coming in one day a week to do odd jobs around the shop."

One of Drolet's sons, John, who is a director for a large corporation, has recently shown an interest in the business and is developing their website.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

In an industry that deals with people's achievements, there are many special stories. Drolet has come across a few. However, the most memorable story is an event that occurred about a year ago and deals with an accomplishment very few couples achieve.

"A couple had come into the store five years earlier to get a joke gift for their parents' 50th wedding anniversary. They had two pictures: the first was a black and white photo of the young couple at their wedding, he in his Air Force uniform and she a lovely young bride. The second was a more recent color photo. They decided on two T-shirts with both photos displayed. Dianne thought the pictures were so beautiful she made a plaque to hang on



Top: To personalize their wide range of items, the laser engravers and sublimation systems of Gifts For Individuals earn their keep on a daily basis.
 Right: Tina hands over a plaque to a client.



Whether they need wood awards or ceramic mugs, Ned is currently working on making it easy for customers to order items from the company's website, www.giftsforindividuals.com.



As a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel whose business is located very near Scott AFB, Drolet does a lot of business with the military.



Bob takes time to cut some corners.



Both the laser and sublimation processes work hard day in and out at Gifts For Individuals. Bob uses the store's Geo Knight heat press, while Robin works with the company's Universal M-300.



the wall as a sample," remembers Drolet.

"Five years later, the same couple came into the store, this time to have pictures placed on the urns containing the ashes of their recently deceased parents. They saw the sample plaque on the wall and recognized the photos. Needless to say, there were tears shed by both customers and employees. Dianne made the picture plates for the urns and gave the young couple the plaque as a remembrance," says Drolet.

He adds that his company works hard to ensure every customer has a distinct and original product. Another that stands out was a memorial display for a Medal Of

Honor recipient. The display marked the dedication of an auditorium in his name at USTRANSCOM at Scott AFB.

A SECOND CAREER

Gifts For Individuals has been the second career for retired Lt. Colonel Ned Drolet. His first was filled with international travel and adventure. His second has been stationary, in a small town in Illinois. While he enjoyed his military career, Drolet was ready for a change by its end. Yet, although he has put nearly as many years into his current career, you get the feeling he is far from done.

Why? What is it he enjoys about this business that keeps him working when he no longer has to?

"It's the recognition factor that people receive whether it is for a job well done, or as a remembrance for being at a particular location, or for just having served and doing what was asked of them. People like to be recognized in a positive manner and that is what the awards industry does. It recognizes people in a positive manner. That's what I do."

And that's what he'll continue to do. **A&E**



Ned Drolet
Owner



Mary Drolet
Owner



Janet McKeon
Office Manager



Barb Guebert
Accounts Manager



John Drolet
Web Site Designer



Dianne Trippensee
Awards Manager



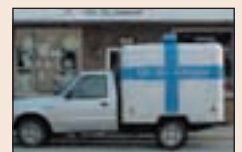
Tina Sheffer
Assistant Manager



Bob Gero
Laser Specialist



Robin Rainey
Awards Specialist



G.F.I.
Delivery Vehicle