

TRADITIONS & Transitions

By Kathleen Cardwell

It is common practice in professional and social circles to ask: “So, what do you do for a living?” Yet, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words, “Life is a journey, not a destination,” invite us to look deeper. The destinations—the places we call “work” and the job titles we hold—are worthy of sharing. But the journeys are far more intriguing and reveal the best stories.

This series, Traditions & Transitions, explores the stories of watchmakers, clockmakers, technicians, designers, educators, industry leaders, and shop owners—but with a twist. Some will share traditions—tales of strong family heritages, of businesses that have been passed down through generations, or learning the trade from a beloved parent. Others will recount transitions—linear or circuitous paths that led them from a career as a teacher or engineer to a career as a clockmaker or watchmaker, or how they turned a treasured hobby into a livelihood.

All in the Family

In 1959, a 15-year-old fibbed about his age so he could get a job at a gas station in his hometown of Everett, Massachusetts. He worked there for 15 years, during high school and college, under the tutelage of owner Myer Itzkowitz. Later, this young man, known as Jack Kurdzionak, FAWCI, CW21 and past AWCI president, would teach physical science in high school for 14 years before taking the first of many chances of a lifetime.

Jack’s journey in watchmaking/watch repair is filled with decades of hard work, adventure, relocations, humor, and people. Two of those people are Jack’s wife Terry, his business partner and current owner of Eckcells, and their son Dave, current owner of the family business, the Watchmaker. Their lives in the world of watchmaking and their stories are intermingled as only family stories can be.

Beginnings

It was through his job at the gas station where Jack developed his interest in mechanical devices and discovered he really liked solving mechanical problems. “Myer Itzkowitz taught me how to repair cars but more important, he became a surrogate father who guided me through my teenage years until I was more than thirty years old. I received what I consider to be a real-life, ‘university education,’ from a man who left school when he was 14,” he said. Jack’s interest in mechanics was further fueled by his Uncle Peter, who introduced him to old pocket watches and sponsored Jack’s membership in the NAWCC. Jack also purchased a collection of tools and spare watch parts for \$200 from retired watchmaker Dave Bertrand. It was just the beginning.



Left to right: Al Redford, Myer Itzkowitz, Ralph DeGenova, Jack Kurdzionak.



Left to right: Myer Itzkowitz, Sam Romsey, Jack Kurdzionak, Al Redford.

Before long, Jack joined the Massachusetts Watchmakers Association and began repairing watches for friends and family. He also enrolled in evening classes at North Bennett Street School in Boston. He remembers the city then as a vibrant watchmaking community with several supply houses and hundreds of active watchmakers.

Watch repair started out as Jack's side gig while he was teaching physical science at a high school in Medford, Massachusetts. His wife Terry was working the second shift as a registered nurse, so Jack would take care of their children in the evenings and repair watches in his home workshop until nearly midnight. By the late 1970s, Jack felt like his teaching career had reached a dead end, so he took a sabbatical and spent a year repairing watches full time and expanding his income base to include commercial clients.

He returned to teaching high school but things had changed. It took one week back in the classroom and one conversation with Terry for Jack to take a quantum leap. He recalls, "I was asked to teach biology instead of physical science, and my classroom had changed to one with no windows. It wasn't for me anymore. I called Terry and asked her if it would be OK to resign. She said, 'Do it!' without the slightest hesitation. After that, things quickly fell into place. Watch repair work never stopped coming in and I was having more fun than I thought possible."

Business Ventures...and Adventures

Jack and Terry took another chance that eventually turned into a family business that would later be owned and managed by their son Dave. At the time, Terry's career was taking a different path, and Jack's watch repair business had outgrown the space in their home. Together, they pondered what might be next. When a local pet shop went out of business and its location became available for lease, Jack and Terry found their answer.

What began as a business venture, turned into quite the adventure, thanks to the worst stock market crash since 1929, the front door of the store falling off its hinges the first time Jack opened it, a major cockroach infestation, a neighbor-naysayer, and some unknown history. It took some time and more than \$3,000 to get the store ready. Jack and Terry opened the Watchmaker Shop in Stoneham, Massachusetts, on Black Friday after Thanksgiving in 1987, with



Dave and Jack Kurdzionak celebrate the Watchmaker as a finalist in the Massachusetts Family Business of the Year Award.

high hopes for a rush of customers. They took in \$15 that entire day. The first week the store was open, a woman by the name of Ethel Bemis stopped in to inform Jack and Terry that not one business had lasted in their location for more than six months. Jack also learned that in the late 1940s, another watchmaker had his shop in the exact location of their new shop. Jack assured her that he and Terry were serious and intended to be there a long time. As the years passed, Ethel became their friend and stopped in frequently.

"There was a lot we didn't know, but we figured it out. For example, almost every vendor wanted an upfront deposit for anything they supplied. That included the telephone, electric, rent, new watches, watch straps, etc. You name it, no one would extend credit to a new business. They knew something I had yet to learn. That is, most new businesses fail within a year or two and often leave with a pile of unpaid bills."

With their combined determination and grit, the Watchmaker has succeeded for 34 years, and is still a point of pride for Jack. "We started out with a few dozen watches for sale and lots of watches to repair. Slowly, we became an integral part of the community, and modestly grew the business every year. Another reward was learning that Terry and I could work together as a team and still speak to each other at day's end."

Teaching and Relocating

In the early 1980s, Jack was offered and accepted a position to teach evening watch repair classes at North Bennett Street School, the same school he had attended 10 years earlier. When that school closed, Jack rented a classroom at a local high school and continued offering classes one night a week until they opened the Watchmaker. After that, Jack moved the classes to the store and taught watch and clock repair there until 2002. Jack added his sense of humor to his teaching. He would make sure his class was included in every public announcement about school cancellations due to snow, whether it was a day he was holding class or not. It became such a popular joke, that his former students would call him to ask, “Is the watch repair school closed?” every time bad weather hit. One of his former students years ago was Stephen Boynton, who has worked at the Watchmaker for 20 years. Jack, Terry, and Dave consider Stephen as a member of the shop’s team but also a part of their family.

In 1995, the Watchmaker moved to a new location across the street. The move required extensive remodeling, as the space hadn’t been renovated since the early 1960s. Jack and Terry’s son Dave was raised in the business, working at the shop in some capacity since his days in junior high school. As early as 1988, Dave was known to say, “Oh, I’ll never work here for the rest of my life.” Not only did Dave continue to work in the shop, in 2008, he took over ownership and management. Jack believes Dave’s contributions were paramount to the shop’s success and continued growth. “Dave brought tangible business sense to the Watchmaker, and that’s what we needed. Terry’s and my contributions were about the watches—selling and repairing. Dave operationalized the critical administrative elements and built the team, many of whom are still working at the Watchmaker.”



Dave Kurdzionak, as a young adolescent at the shop.



Terry Ayers Kurdzionak, Owner, Eckcells

While recovering from a back injury in 1987, Terry realized it was time for a change from her career as a nurse, and time to take a chance. She joined Jack at the Watchmaker, working as both the bookkeeper and as counter staff. “I was very comfortable dealing with the public in a retail setting. My years working as a nurse prepared me for dealing with people who had varying needs and priorities,” she said. Eight years later, Terry purchased Eckcells from a retiring jeweler named Werner Eckstein, in the nearby town of Woburn, Massachusetts. She felt good about the decision. “We had always purchased our batteries from him and it seemed to be an opportunity for me to be involved even more.”

One of the initial challenges Terry faced was transferring the computer inventory from Eckstein’s old computer to an updated system that was more efficient. But there were new opportunities, too. Eckcells became recognized in the community as a good business partner. Terry became a board member for the Chamber of Commerce, a trustee of the local savings bank, and served as president of the Community Development Corporation, which led to the revitalization of downtown Stoneham—all of which she believes, were a far cry from what she had been doing previously.

Like Jack, Terry attributes her success to her mentors and the opportunities to travel and meet others in the industry. She names Jack, her “sidekick since 1966,” at the top of the list, and also the late Bob Weiner, former owner of A. Cohen Co. in Boston, Massachusetts. According to Terry, “When Bob sold the A. Cohen Co., he came to work with us. His knowledge and sense of humor were always appreciated. He was professional, attentive, and it was a delight to work with him.” And Terry and Jack have met folks from all over the world who share their love of watchmaking. “We have traveled several times on the H.B. Fried European tours, attended the Basel Fair, and established lifelong friendships,” she said. And like Jack, she’s happy to share her perspective and her advice. “Any newcomer to the business needs to keep their eyes open to the constant changes, join the professional organizations, like AWCI, the Chamber of Commerce, and others. It’s also valuable to go to the local and state events that complement a watchmaker’s business, trade, or professional needs, and to make oneself known and available in the local community.”

Terry admits that being a female in the watchmaking industry was an adjustment, but her many skills, including diplomacy, have served her well over the years. “My favorite memory is that of explaining a repair to a customer who happened to be the chief of medicine at a hospital where I formerly worked. It was quite the role reversal!”

David Kurdzionak, Owner, The Watchmaker



For Jack and Terry's son Dave, working in the family watch repair business wasn't a choice he made right away, as he didn't see himself as mechanically inclined. His real love was music, and he didn't have any interest in becoming a watchmaker. After college, he started working at the business full time and realized that there was more to running a watch repair business than repairing

watches. "Repairing watches is only a part of the shop being successful. There is customer and vendor relations, administration duties, hiring, and everything else that has to work, just to be able to turn the lights on and offer repair service."

Dave is in his 13th year of owning the Watchmaker. He's learned a lot over the years about managing a team and adapting to changes in the industry. "The dynamics of having a lot of people in a small space, all having to work together as a team has been challenging. But over the years we've really assembled a great team which makes coming to work something I often look forward to, and I think even the staff does too!"

He's grateful to his parents for being the wonderful guides they have been throughout his career, and he knows he can always rely on them. "It's invaluable to me that I can still pick up the phone and bounce ideas off them, ask for advice, or just vent," he said.

Dave has his own perspectives on the watchmaking industry. He is frequently surprised by the popular narrative of "nobody wears watches anymore" as he sees the demand for watchmakers increasing. According to Dave, "We've never been busier than we are now, and in reality, we sometimes spend more time here in the shop working with each other than we do with our families. It's important that we all get along, so when I make unilateral decisions, I consult with the people that will be most affected by the change. A happy team makes for a successful business. So far, this strategy has worked out quite well for us."

And like his father, Dave has a keen sense of humor. "Before my parents opened the store, Dad worked out of a tiny room in the basement of our house. I was five or six years old. From upstairs, I learned a bunch of new words every time Dad dropped a watch part or a tool."

Dave has served as president and past chairman of the board for the Massachusetts Watchmakers-Clockmakers Association, and as a board member for the Stoneham Chamber of Commerce. The Watchmaker (www.thewatchmaker.com) is the official service provider for Oris watches for the United States, and is recognized as an official service center for Victorinox, Cartier, Montblanc, Jaeger LeCoultre Atmos Clocks, Baume & Mercier. The shop also specializes in Tag Heuer, Omega, Longines, Rado, Tissot, Hamilton, Movado, and many other brands. In 2013, the Watchmaker was a finalist in the Massachusetts Family Business of the Year Award. Dave is also a musician in the Boston Area, playing tenor saxophone and the Hammond organ.



The Watchmaker shop in Stoneham, Massachusetts.

All with A Little Help from His Friends

Jack is quick to recount the many people and events that have deeply influenced his growth and his perspectives as a watchmaker. Irving Cohen, Boston's most knowledgeable watch material dealer, supported Jack and Terry with spare parts, business acumen, and introduced them to the great network of watchmakers that were in the Boston area at that time. Help and advice came from many sources, including Henry B. Fried, Henry Frystak, and many others, both well-known and not so well-known. He considers them to be colleagues, but also, his dear friends. "The camaraderie that the people in our industry have and their willingness to support each other, is truly remarkable. Watchmakers are like family to each other, not only here in the United States, but all over the world. I have met watchmakers from other countries and find that we have a unique bond with one another." He also fondly recalls the sage advice of his calculus professor, Ellen Dunlap. "She told me to 'know myself and know my subject. Those were the keys to success.'"

And over the years, Jack's work and his involvement in AWCI have afforded him and Terry trips to many places around the world. "I am no longer a parochial watchmaker from Boston, but rather a watchmaker who has learned from a wide array of American watchmakers by being an active AWCI member," he said. One of Jack's favorite examples was the opportunity to work with Bernhard Stoerber to develop the CW21 exam. "Not only did we develop the exam, but I also developed into a better watchmaker because of that collaboration. The quality

of my work has continually improved through all the networking and involvement.”

Perspectives on the Industry

Besides his more than 50 years at the bench, Jack also writes the “From the Workshop” column for *Horological Times*, a treasured part of his career since 1996. Initially, he wasn’t sure what he could possibly write each month that would benefit the readers. Former executive director and magazine editor Milt Stevens offered Jack some advice. “He told me, ‘Share whatever you know and it would be of value to our members,’ and I have been doing just that. I see my monthly article as a place to share what I have learned, and to help other watchmakers.” More than 300 articles later, Jack is still offering AWC members a unique and varied glimpse inside his workshop. For Jack, sharing his knowledge and experiences in the articles is second nature, stemming both from his many years as a teacher, and from his passions for discovering answers. “I enjoy so many aspects of what I do, and problem solving is at the top of the list. First, it is personally rewarding to diagnose a problem and solve it. Then, to be able to share that with our members in the hope that it will help them become more proficient in their work.”

The pay-it-forward mentality is strong in Jack’s perspectives. He knows that tens of thousands of bench watchmakers who entered the profession after WWII and the Korean War have retired or passed away. He also has witnessed how drastically the industry has changed. “Independent, supportive companies and watchmakers are nearly irrelevant to the Swiss and Japanese watch companies, who design, develop, manufacture, distribute, retail, and service their watches. Now, there are a handful of movement makers and suppliers. As our numbers continue to decline, we need more than ever to support each other so that we can all thrive and the profession will continue into future generations.”

A Workshop in Campton, New Hampshire

These days, you’ll find Jack in his workshop, in Campton, New Hampshire, a country burg of less than 4,000 people. He’s happy to describe that his workshop, which includes his bench, a formal office, and storage/inventory space for Terry’s business, encompasses the entire cellar of the home he and



The view from the summit of Cannon Mountain in Franconia Notch, New Hampshire.

Terry built 12 years ago. The breathtaking view of the White Mountains and living a simpler life are just two of the reasons Jack and Terry call Campton home. Not surprisingly, they stay in touch with many of the friends, customers, and associates from their days of running the Watchmaker in Stoneham.

Of all the memories they hold dear, one particular anecdote rings true to Jack’s personality and his love of watchmaking. As the story goes, Jack and Terry were having dinner at a restaurant when the folks next to them asked for the time. Jack lifted his shirt sleeve to reveal four watches on his wrist and forearm. He answered the question without hesitation, and without noticing the look on their faces. Terry stared in disbelief. “I was mortified, wondering what these people must think, but I couldn’t stop laughing,” she said. No surprise, really. Jack often wore multiple watches, to see them work and to test their accuracy. They are a part of him.

Photos: Courtesy of Jack, Terry, and Dave Kurdzionak.

If you have a story to tell or you want to recommend a friend, colleague, or family member for the Traditions & Transitions series, email us at editor@awci.com.

Kathleen Cardwell is a freelance writer/editor based in Cincinnati, Ohio, US. Prior to freelancing, she spent 30 years working in higher education and corporate communications.