

NYLILA Lifetime Achievement Award: Ken Benson, Riverhead Building Supply

“This is going to be easy. With me, it’s pretty simple.”

That was how Ken Benson responded when asked for an interview for this profile.

He meant it, too. In fact, if there is one quote that sums up Ken’s story more than any other, it is this one: “I just like to work.” And if we chose to print only that in place of this entire profile, it would probably suit Ken just fine.

Nonetheless, everyone’s gone to the trouble of printing this page and attending the awards ceremony, so let’s indulge in a bit more of Ken’s story.

Unlike many of Ken’s colleagues in the industry, he wasn’t born into a lumber family and didn’t get his start sweeping lumber yard floors as a teen. But from an early age he found that just about any kind of work appealed to him. “As a young kid I was doing whatever I could to make money,” he recalls. “I dug ditches. I had a paper route at age twelve. I worked at gas stations. I just liked working.”

He was born and raised in Nesconset, Long Island at a family home with chickens and goats, on a street where his family members lived in ten out of the twelve houses – but he wouldn’t necessarily characterize it as a rural upbringing. “In the 1950s Long Island was pretty much *all* rural,” he says. “Back then that was pretty much the way you grew up.”

After graduating from Smithtown High School, he went off to college and promptly left after one semester. His reason might sound familiar: “It’s just not for me. I wanted to work.”

In his late teens he went to work for some family in the furniture business, both making and selling it. By his early thirties, however, the business closed its doors. That’s when the lumber industry came calling. He had a friend in the business who invited him to try it out and see how he liked it.

In 1984, Ken took a job as a dispatcher with Nassau-Suffolk Lumber. Over the next three decades he worked his way up through the ranks, from assistant manager to manager to running locations in Smithtown and Port Jefferson. He found success through a simple combination of hard work, consistency, and showing up early. In fact, he says that over the course of 55 years of his working life, he’s only been late three times. “I remember all three of them,” he adds.

A few years back Riverhead Building Supply bought out Nassau-Suffolk and Ken was faced with a decision. He had a job with them if he wanted it, but he had already reached retirement age. “I wasn’t ready,” he decided. “I’ve worked all my life and I said I’m really not ready. That was a good decision. Riverhead is a great company to work for. You get up in the morning and you know you’re going to work for one of the best companies on Long Island.”

Now, roughly three-and-a-half years later, however, he's closer to being ready. Ken estimates that he will retire in the next six months to a year. He's got two daughters, three grandkids, and recently moved to Coram, Long Island. He's approaching the end of his career with a characteristic shrug. "Retirement will be a little different," he notes. "I'll see how it goes. I'll probably do a little treasure hunting."

Wading through the water with his metal detector, Ken has found not only a hobby that has kept him interested for 30 years, but countless treasures: more than 500 gold rings, bracelets, a wedding band from 1890, school rings from 1905 and 1910, and lots of old coins, including some large pennies from the 1700s. It's a hobby he discovered because – why else? – he likes staying busy.

"I was down in the islands for vacation," he recalls. "My wife liked to lay on the beach. I don't lay on the beach. I said, I'm going to get a metal detector and go in the water. I found a gold ring – that got me hooked."

As he prepares to wade off into the sunset, metal detector in hand, Ken is grateful for a long and fruitful career, and offers a simple bit of wisdom to the next generation of the lumber industry: "Just work hard, learn as much as you can, and get along with everybody. That's all I can think of. That's all I ever did. I'm not a person to give advice – I just do my job."