



2018 ENYLDA Lifetime Achievement Award Jay Curtis Curtis Lumber Co., Inc.

Jay Curtis is not one to brag.

The head of Curtis Lumber is a humble man, not one to mention the awards that he and his family company have won, such as *ProSales Magazine's* 2004 Dealer of the Year. Or the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve Patriot Award from the Department of Defense. Or the Good Scout Award from the Boy Scouts. Or the 2017 Ozzie Award from Partners in Leadership for "excellence in accountability, leadership and culture."

In fact, Jay didn't mention a single one of those during our conversation, even when asked specifically about awards or community service. (Sorry, Jay, I found out about them anyway.)

"I'm not looking for pats on the back or adulation," he says. "That's good for other people, but it never lit up my life."

Well, unfortunately for Jay Curtis, the awards keep coming, including this year's richly deserved Eastern New York Lumber Dealers Association Lifetime Achievement Award.

It truly has been a lifetime. "I was born into this industry," Jay says of the business that goes back through five generations of his family. "Now six," he adds, pointing out that his children work in the business, too. "Possibly seven with the addition of a new grandchild."

He remembers his first jobs in the lumberyard, starting around ten or twelve years old. "I worked weekends and after school in the store, winters plowing snow," he recalls. "At that point in time it was just fun stuff to do – of course, that included *not* getting paid."

What was his first paid job? "Probably something stupid like putting away nails or cleaning garbage out of the building," he says.

He stuck around, progressing through pretty much every role in the company: waiting on customers, driving trucks, making deliveries, learning how to build a house and do estimates. Despite his years of experience, and birthright, however, he didn't necessarily plan on spending a lifetime in the family business. "It's probably the last thing I wanted to do," he jokes.

So he left, working at another chain retailer for a few years after high school. But he eventually returned after college, admitting, "I begged to come back."

When asked what brought him back, Jay is typically self-effacing: "I guess it comes down to a lack of viable alternatives."

That was 1980, and he's remained a proud member of the Curtis family, both personally and professionally, ever since. Eventually, he took the reins of the company, though he has difficulty pinpointing exactly when. "It's a family business," he shrugs. "What day exactly do you stop having to answer to everyone else?"

Looking back on his long career at Curtis Lumber, he recalls the late 90s and early 00s as possibly his favorite period. "I had gone from managing a small branch yard to moving back into the main yard in Ballston Spa," he explains. "And then it got to the point where the circumstances were right for me to take over the operation."

It was also during that time period, roughly 2004, when Curtis Lumber broke the \$100 million threshold, which Jay cites as a signature achievement – that is until they break \$200 million, which is coming up quickly on the horizon. Through acquisition and a relentless focus on growth and customer service, Curtis now boasts 21 locations throughout New York and Vermont.

"As long as you're growing you're not going," he says. "The minute you stop growing you *are* going – you won't be around long."

How did Jay achieve that growth? "You've just got to do a better job taking care of your customers than everyone else," he explains. "Don't give your customers viable alternatives to your service, because that's exactly how far loyalty goes. And you've got to treat your people well and give them respect to get the job done."

Looking back on the legacy left by his family's many decades in the lumber business, and what it means in context of his own life, Jay is characteristically understated. "It's just what I do. Some people spend their whole life driving a garbage truck. What does it mean? It means there's no garbage in the neighborhood," he philosophizes. "I can drive around and see 25,000 homes that we've had a part in. It's just a result of staying in business and doing a good job."

That humble approach is something he tries to pass down to his children, Christopher, 33, and Kylie, 27, who both work in the family business.

In his spare time, Jay enjoys some well-earned rest and relaxation. "My wife and I have a nice little place in Mexico where we spend some time," he says. "I do remember to take vacations. We're down on the Baja. We do a lot of exploring, chilling out, relaxing, occasionally we get to see some of the Baja 1000 race."

Jay and his wife Kendra have been together since 1980. They literally met in mid-air at the Adirondack Balloon Festival. "Our balloons bumped," he recalls. "We still talk about it to this day."

"I may be a complex person, but my life is pretty simple. I try to keep it to a minimum of aggravation and pass that along to others," he summarizes. "I do my thing and that's what makes me happy."