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Tom Ready (left) bought the company from his father, Joe, and now his 13-year old son, Dayton, is taking an interest in Ready Bus Line, La Crescent, MN.

Ready to go since 1952

2005★UMA

SMALL OPERATOR OF THE YEAR

Ready Bus Line is honored as 2005 UMA Small Operator of the Year

By David Hubbard

As a young man, Tom Ready's ambition was to go away to college to become a certified public accountant and work Monday through Friday. The way it played out, he stayed close to home in La Crescent, MN, attended nearby University of Wisconsin La Crosse and spent summers driving school buses for his father, Joe Ready.

The elder Ready started the business in 1952 with one school bus. Today, Ready Bus Line employs 85 and the fleet stands at 18 Van Hool and MCI motorcoaches, two MC1000s, along with the division of 50 yellow school buses.

"In 1975, I was halfway through college when my dad tells me he has purchased a GMC motorcoach from Clancy Cornell who founded ABC Companies," Ready recalls. "I have been working seven days a week ever since."

Whatever he had planned, he would soon be in the bus business. Once he graduated, Ready decided to make a go of the hand dealt to him. He says he had to buy his way into the family business "a tire at a time."

"Dad was from the old school that

held a man had to work and pay for what he had. However, I told him if we were going to do this we would need better equipment," he says. "The next year, we bought a new 1976 GMC motorcoach and were on our way."

Ready says he took his place in the office handling the books and payroll and his dad agreed to let him run the company from that point 35 years ago.

Ready's wife Kathy holds a Ph.D. in Business Administration and is a college professor at University of Minnesota, Winona. Additionally, her grant writing skills earned Ready Bus Line three wheelchair grants and a security grant. She also helps with all the details of the company contracts.

Tom and Kathy have one son, Dayton, age 13, who is taking an interest in the bus business. "He has attended almost all the UMA Expos and other operators have always treated him like their own grandson," says Ready. "Now he is ready to go to work answering the phones, and like me, he prefers the front office."

To bolster business early on, Ready connected with two college friends

who worked in the senior citizen tour market and provided transportation for their groups. One of their more successful outings was a trip to the World's Fair in Knoxville, TN. Ready Bus Line has been providing motorcoaches for that company ever since. Their collaborations and high quality service year after year have made both companies successful, and has allowed Ready Bus Line to expand with a continually updated fleet.

Ready's association with ABC Companies dates back to the days he tagged along with his father to buy used buses.

"Dad always bought from Clancy," he says. "We bought our first new motorcoach in 1981 and made new equipment our policy once the Cornells acquired the Van Hool franchise."

Ready says he has purchased VanHools exclusively since 2000 when he switched to the C model. In the last year and a half, he has added four more to the fleet.

Joe Ready retired from the operation eight years ago. Shortly after, in 1999, Tom and his wife, Kathy bought

out his dad's share of the business.

"I think it's a little ironic that I chose to grow the business and then had to pay the price for my success," Ready says in his tongue-in-cheek manner. "All my good work cost me double when it came time to buy the company. But I am still here everyday."

As a team, the two represent a major change in the style of motorcoach operations.

"Dad was the shop man and drove all the time," says Ready. "To this day, I am not a mechanic."

Still, Ready Bus Line enjoys uncanny continuity and loyalty from an experienced team in the maintenance department.

"Several of our mechanics started out working for dad at this company 40 years ago," says Ready. "Our 'junior mechanic' has been with us 19 years. Along with a strong mechanical staff, our company accountant, Elaine Smith, is a mainstay. She has worked side by side with me and my wife through all our financial decisions."

Ready regards her support as a long-term asset of Ready Bus Line.

"Then there are my drivers," he adds. "We have the greatest group of professional drivers a company could ask for. These dedicated individuals will work any day — even if it interferes with a holiday or family celebration."

He says that many of his senior drivers have been on board since 1980 and still handle the extended tours. "They raised their kids driving these tours and are now out on the road as empty-nesters," he says. "High-end, quality motorcoach touring is the cream of the crop for these top performers."

Ready says the extended tours throughout New England, Arizona, Texas, Alaska and Canada represent roughly a third of the business, school contracts another third in addition to regular charter work, plus the yellow school bus division.

"We handle a lot of student groups," says Ready. "My favorite is he



Joe Ready always bought buses from Clancy Cornell. Ready Bus Line purchased its first new coach in 1981 and made new equipment a company policy when the Cornells acquired the Van Hool franchise.

trip into Washington D.C. each spring, when the students get the chance to see what their country is all about."

Thoroughly entrenched in the motorcoach industry, Ready has served on the board of the United Motorcoach Association (UMA) since 1990. He believes that to make an industry strong, one must also volunteer skills to the industry.

"We are still battling the perception that the motorcoach business is only

pose problems," says Ready. "I call them the low-quality providers for how they bring the industry down. They hire incapable and inexperienced drivers, do poor maintenance on their vehicles and offer shoddy customer service."

Ready says such sub-par business practices will always catch up to them. However, he sees another problem.

"When their activity level slacks off, they lower their prices even more and again the unsuspecting public thinks that is how everyone in the motorcoach industry operates," he says. "They learn the hard way that it is more about quality, trust and reliability. The customer who understands that appreciates the rates we charge."

Ready believes the only solution is for conscientious motorcoach carriers to strive continually to raise the bar and not chase the shadows.

"Ultimately we are selling safety, capability and experience," he says. "Support your employees and they will raise the bar to an even higher level."

As further validation of Ready Bus Line's philosophy, the United Motorcoach Association honored the Ready team with its Vision Award as UMA 2005 Small Operator of the Year.

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Those places along the Ready Bus Line itinerary extend across the continent from Alaska and Canada to Arizona and Texas.

about getting people from one dot on the map to the next," he says. "As anyone in this business knows, there is much more to it than just moving people around. We need for more people to understand that the best use of a motorcoach is at the high-end with exciting opportunities for luxury-type experiences."

The issues surrounding pricing exacerbate that effort. "The low-ballers are out there and will always