

NADEAN CUDDEFORD: SET ON HARD WORK, PASSION AND IGNORING GENDER ROLES

WRITTEN BY ANITA LIEN
RECREATION VEHICLE DEALERS ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

Nadean Cuddeford's first RV experience involved taking a trip in a rented motorhome to the Okanagan (British Columbia) when she was eleven years old. Like any children at that age, she was not thinking about a future career involving working with recreation vehicles.

Her formal introduction to the RV industry and the RV service technician trade did not happen until 1999 when she attended a trades seminar held at Okanagan College in Kelowna, B.C. At the time, she was a stay-at-home mom that ran the family farm while helping her father-in-law with his aircraft business. When Cuddeford learned about the RV service technician trade, she was instantly drawn to it, because of the diversity of the trade and the possibility of a career.

Cuddeford enrolled in the pre-employment program at Okanagan College, which did not require any trades experience, and she never looked back. With a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm, she was very eager to work but quickly learned most RV dealerships in her area were not hiring women. Rather than despair, she decided to start her own mobile RV repair business, which she did while raising an infant. To continue her apprenticeship, she took on jobs that required working under another mobile RV repair business. As a journeyman, this person could sign off on-the-job hours as well as expand the work she could take on. However, there were limitations to a mobile repair business and to ensure her continued education and training, Cuddeford once again found herself needing to work at an RV dealership.

Living in a small community where there were not too many RV dealerships, Cuddeford applied and reapplied to the same dealerships without much success. Giving it one final attempt, she applied once again but came armed with a photo album full of extensive repair work and happy customer testimonials with an offer to work for two weeks without pay if needed, to help convince her future employers of what she was capable of. **Once her skills were validated, she quickly rose through the ranks.** Over the years, she has worked her way up from an apprentice to Red Seal designated shop foreman. She then became Warranty Department Manager, Service Manager, and Assistant General Manager in various RV dealerships.

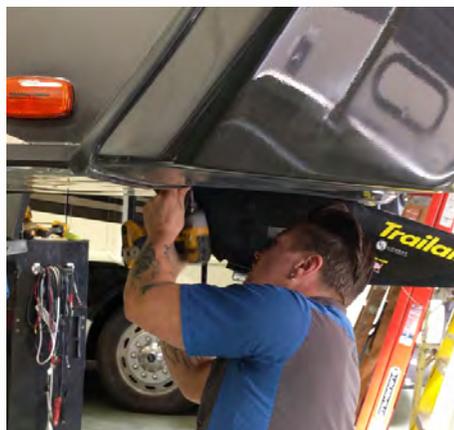
Now working as the National Service Manager at Fraserway RV, her role involves training service staff and department managers and providing support to General Managers in all thirteen locations across Canada. Prior to the pandemic, much of her time was spent on the road visiting each of the thirteen locations.

Cuddeford laments that the pandemic has disrupted ways of doing business but through changes in strategies and video conferencing, she has been able to offer support from her home office.



Outside of her busy work schedule, she is actively involved in one of her daughter's hockey team, while her husband serves as the coach. The time spent with the kids and encouraging them to try their best offers much fulfillment while learning the virtue of patience.

Working in an industry that promotes outdoor lifestyle and work-life balance does not mean that balance is magically achieved. "I must be honest here, we are in an industry that doesn't slow down enough in the season for a solid balance between the two... but you get to know the industry and ride the ebbs and flows of the year, making sure the time you spend with your family is not necessary quantity but quality."



However, this pandemic has also given her the opportunity to take a few minutes out of her day to connect with her family, hear the highlights of their day, organize household chores and just learn to relax.

As demonstrated through her rise in the recreation vehicle industry, Cuddeford serves as an inspiration for apprentices that are new to the trade and industry. Above everything else, Cuddeford hopes her children will find motivation in her. **"I like to think I have shown my daughters that hard work, a passion for something and ignoring the gender roles people like to put you into can help you succeed in anything you put your mind to."**

The advice that she would offer to her younger self and her daughters would be,



don't settle for what people think you should be and strive to be better. Take chances and don't be afraid to fail!"



exchange of ideas as these promotes a supportive culture. The RV shop is a great place for that as there is much to learn and there is more than one way to solve a complex problem.

As a female leader in the male-dominated industry, Cuddeford hopes that the RV industry will start changing its mindset and hire more women. **“I see women excel everywhere, but I currently don’t see many in sales or in the shop at this time...both of which I have seen women excel when you put the right person in the right position.”** During the recruitment process, dealerships need to do away with gender-based hiring for certain positions and look to the opposite spectrum. Meanwhile, women need to be empowered to have the confidence to apply. As an industry with bountiful yet little known opportunities, Cuddeford believes dealerships should look to hire and train from the ground up. “Start looking for the women eager to be molded, mentored, and sponsored into the industry. Women usually get back into the workforce after child rearing and think it’s too late for them to change careers...they need to be shown it’s never too late to try something new. It is not a job, but a career that will provide stability and a good future for their families.”

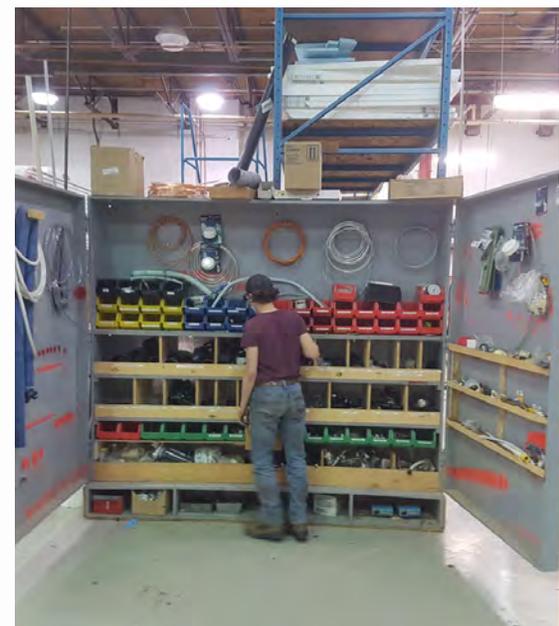
The future of the RV industry is looking positive with more people looking to RVs as a vacation and even a short-term housing option. The benefit to this uptick in the market is that “this provides more knowledge of the industry itself for people to “fall” into the trade, which seems to be how most people do it,” said Cuddeford. She also believes there is much potential for the RV industry to promote the diversity of the trade to students as young as grade ten and not limit that discussion just to boys. Kids are maturing at a much younger age, the more information they have, the earlier they can identify their areas of interest, hopefully with RVs.

A right combination of hard and soft skills is required for every job. According to Cuddeford, as an apprentice or technician, “having logical thought and hands-on approach will ensure the job is done correctly and efficiently.” As a Manager, “don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty and make mistakes...the best lessons are taught from failure.”

To help new employees learn the company culture and integrate as a team, Cuddeford believes mentorship is not only essential in the workplace, but it should also be a part of any industry. She is a strong advocate for collaboration and



Look to hire your replacement, not just an employee.



Nadean Cuddeford has recently been invited to be a part of the Program Advisory Committee at Okanagan College.