

Jim Brauner: Ambassador for the Florida Roofing Industry

By John Hellein, ROOFING FLORIDA Magazine Editor

Jim Brauner started in the roofing sales business in 1979, working with his brother at *Brauner Equipment Company* in Virginia. Soon after he started, the local roofing association scheduled a trade show. In preparation, he ran out to JC Penney's and purchased a couple of new suits, wanting to look sharp for the trade show. He walked into the trade show with shirt, tie, jacket and slacks to the bemusement of his brother. By the end of the day, he had lost the tie and made a meaningful contact. Looking back more than 30 years ago on the show, he clearly remembers his encounter with a man named Jerry Ball of *B&B Roofing* who encouraged him to get involved in the industry and to take the time to get to know and learn from the professional contractors that he

would be selling equipment to. "That stuck in my mind all these years," Jim said as we drove north from Orlando to Daytona Beach for one of Brauner's daily sales trips. Between staccato sales calls on Jim's ruggedized flip phone, we spoke about Jim's three decades in the roofing industry, his business philosophy, FRSA involvement since moving to Florida and about challenges facing the industry.

Eighteen years after he started selling roofing equipment, Jim moved to Florida in 1997. He took a position at *Phoenix Sales*, an FRSA member at the time, and started getting involved in the Florida roofing industry. The following year, he attended his first *FRSA Convention and Trade Show* at Disney World and by 2001 he had become an FRSA director. In 2002, Jim started his own company, *Roofing Equipment of Florida* (REF) and he became active on the *Membership Committee*. His wife of 30 years, Tommi, a registered nurse, joined the REF team full time in 2006 and works closely with Jim taking care of customers. In 2004, Jim also became involved on the *Convention Committee*. He has remained an active leader in these two committees every year since and has also participated on the *Affiliate Council*, the *Disaster Preparedness and Response Committee* and served on the *FRSA Credit Union Board of Directors*. In addition to his direct involvement with FRSA, he is also a member of two FRSA affiliates: the *Roofing Contractors Association of South Florida* (RCASF) and the *Central Florida Roofing and Sheet Metal Contractors Association* (CFRSA) where he served as President in 2007.

Other FRSA members began to take notice of Jim's contributions to the Association and he was recognized with the *Charlie Raymond Membership Award* in 2004 (and again in 2009 and 2010). In 2005, he received the *Enthusiasm Gets It Done Award*; and in 2006, he received the *Earl R. Blank Memorial Heart Award*.

"If I wasn't a member of FRSA, I don't think that I would still be in business," Jim Brauner says. "It's good to be around people with the same problems." It is good therapy to know that you are not alone in the challenges that you face in your business. "You can run things off of each other. It helps you run your business better by being a member."

Making It Look Easy

Just one day on the road with Jim Brauner and it is not difficult to see how his enthusiasm for the Florida roofing industry benefits FRSA. In the course of a usual day, Jim makes the opportunity to speak to three to five prospective members. Ann Marie Cargo, the *FRSA Director of Membership Services*, had shared with me that she typically receives at least three calls a day from Jim either feeding her information about someone new he has met who wants membership information or requesting information from her about Association prospects: this day on the road was no exception. I asked Jim how he "sells" FRSA membership. The benefits he presents to contractors include the Self Insurers Fund and Continuing Education benefits among others but Jim felt that Cam Fentriss' work in Tallahassee gave members "the biggest bang for the buck." He spoke of workers' compensation and other State meetings where FRSA is sometimes the only Association to regularly attend. I thought of Cam's well-versed familiarity with the current *Florida Building Code* issues (see her article on page 6) and knew exactly the value he was referring to.

Jim is proud of the 93 new members that have joined FRSA in the past 12 months. Of course, adding new members to the Association is necessary but retaining existing members is just as vital. The *Membership Committee* has a plan for that: six members of the committee are focused on nothing but reaching out to current members to highlight the benefits they have received in the past year

Jim Brauner with FRSA Past President Neil Samuels at the R&R Industries sheet metal shop in Holly Hill.

of membership and to encourage them to renew.

After our first stop at *Stuart Lyon Roofing* next to the Daytona International Speedway and Airport, I noticed that the digital odometer on Jim's Hemi pickup truck had just reached 240,000 miles. When I pointed the mileage out to Jim I learned that the pickup truck was his alternate and that he logs most of his miles in a Cummins Diesel pickup – so my estimate of 300 miles per day average is probably a bit conservative.

Jim finishes a call with one of his two full time mechanics, Mark, and we resume speaking about the importance that Jim places on accountability with customers. For him and everyone at REF, taking responsibility to make sure that customers are taken care of, stands at the center of their efforts. Each of the questions that Jim had asked Mark as they spoke about a particular repair for a customer made sure that customer satisfaction was not lost in the details. Jim says, "One thing I like is great service. I like to provide great service on delivery and also on repair." Later in the day, an incoming call provides an example of what he means. A customer who just received a generator he purchased through REF called to ask if he needs to drain the oil in the generator and fill it with operating oil. Jim responds that his mechanic had already replaced the oil and delivered the generator ready to go. One less concern for the customer.

In response to the slow economy, Jim says, "I cut back like everyone else, that's why I'm still in business." Part of that cutting back has been to limit his sales territory to Florida. He used to travel to Alabama and as far as Louisiana to meet with customers but says that, while there are still people that buy from him out of state, it has been a year and a half since he has travelled outside



Florida. Noting that business has started to pick up again he says "Actually, the whole year has been good." As a result, he has started expanding operations again, taking time to train a new sales person in the South Florida area.

For our next stop, we visit *R&R Industries* in Holly Hill. Waiting to hear whether FRSA Past President (1991) Neil Samuels is available, we look around the walls of the room covered with testimony letters from happy customers and industry awards including an FRSA *Honorary Member* plaque for Louis Samuels and a *Life Member* plaque for Neil Samuels. Brauner gives me a little history on the kettle, painted candy apple red (you will have to take my word for it), that sits in the far corner of the room. The kettle was made in 1948, the same year *R&R Industries* incorporated and was manufactured by *Aeroil Manufacturers* (1917-2008) out of New Jersey. Later, Neil would tell me that the backside of the kettle features a tag that reads "Sold by *Julien P. Benjamin Equipment Company*".

Underbidding Means Everybody Loses

Neil Samuels stepped up to the Dutch door and invited us back to his office. Among the topics we discuss, Samuels says, "People are still bidding 25 percent below a project's value." He recognizes such margins are not good for anyone: the under bidding company cannot be making any money on the project and it cuts out other companies from being competitive. Jim closes the conversation with a reminder of the equipment and services he can provide to *R&R* and we are invited for a brief tour of the metal work shop."



This Aeroil kerosene burning, hand pumped kettle was manufactured in 1948, the same year that R&R Industries was established.

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Back in the pickup, Jim Brauner credits his survival in the industry to his involvement in FRSA. "If I wasn't a member of FRSA, I don't think that I would still be in business," he says. "It's good to be around people with the same problems." He says that it is good therapy to know that you are not alone in the challenges that you face in your business. "You can run things off of each other. It helps you run

your business better by being a member." Having peers to talk to, to bounce ideas off of, a group of people going through similar experiences are all part of the benefits of FRSA membership that are difficult to quantify; but they are so important. Jim is glad to see that many of the newer members show an eagerness to get involved in the Association.

He strongly believes in "members supporting members" and says that one of his pet peeves is doing business with nonmembers. Suppliers that he has worked with for

years are all members and new suppliers have a way of becoming members after working with Jim. I listened to Jim pitch the importance of being an associate member to one of his new suppliers, a generator manufacturer. "You'll be the only generator manufacturer who is an FRSA member; with Jim Brauner, the chair of the membership committee, selling them." The irresistible logic was at work. Call number four of the day to Ann Marie Cargo with the company's information and another membership application was on its way.

As we started to head south in Daytona Beach looking for a place to grab some lunch before returning to Orlando, Jim reflected on what it has taken to be successful over 33 years of business in the roofing industry. "If you tell the customer something, stick by it," he says. "Even if you make a mistake and give out the wrong price on something."

Accountability. Integrity. Commitment to provide personal and complete service to his customers as well as commitment to the industry and to FRSA are outstanding and infectious qualities I learned to appreciate about Jim Brauner. Another benefit? Someone who spends as much time visiting customers knows great places to eat. We stopped at Aunt Catfish's on the river in Daytona and enjoyed some great seafood at a decent price.

-RFM-

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