

In Memoriam: The Lasting Legacy of Ed York

By John Downey

Special to Cleaning & Restoration

On March 13, surrounded by loved ones, Edgar P. "Ed" York's big ol' heart finally gave out at a hospice facility near his home in Vancouver, WA. He was 79. He is survived by his wife of 36 years, Wanda, six children, 10 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

Such were his contributions that Ed York truly had no peers in the carpet cleaning industry. In January 1992, *Cleanfax* readers voted him the "Granddad of Carpet Cleaners" by a wide margin, and in January 2000, *Cleanfax* recognized him as its Person of the 20th Century. Again, it wasn't a close call.

A Master Innovator

The imprint Ed York left on virtually all aspects of the carpet cleaning industry is amazing. From the time he entered the industry in 1969, he defined the cutting edge. A comprehensive recounting of his contributions would entail the writing of a book. We haven't the luxury here. So following, greatly condensed, are the highlights:

Cleaning methods: *Steam cleaning* (a.k.a. *hot water extraction*), while not invented by York, more than anyone else he forced the industry to take notice of this new and at the time (late 1960s) controversial cleaning method. He took his steam cleaner on the road to industry trade shows and demonstrated it in the face of scorn and ridicule. The establishment (whom he would dramatically label the "elites") scoffed when he predicted this new method would revolutionize the industry. So he bypassed them and went direct to the little guy: the independent mom and pop cleaner. Within five years steam cleaning *was* the standard.

In recent years, in testament to his still nimble mind, York was again out in front of the pack, this time championing *low-moisture cleaning* using the Cimex machine. A few years later, low-moisture cleaning (a.k.a. *encapsulation*) has become the talk of the industry.

Product distribution: Ed and Wanda York's first company, *Steam Services*, was the original carpet cleaning industry-specific distributor and mail-order merchandiser. *Steam Services* provided the foundation from which so many other York innovations grew. Moreover, it became the distribution model for the industry. "The carpet cleaning product distribution industry started with *Steam Services* and Ed York," Lee Pemberton, one of the industry's most respected trainers and distributors, has observed. "Before Ed, it just didn't exist."

Technical training: York recognized that technician-level training was sorely needed, and he insisted that all new purchasers of his steam cleaning equipment undergo three days of training with crews from his associated cleaning company. *Steam Services* began sponsoring technical training schools in 1971. By 1973, *Steam Services* had eight state-certified teachers on staff. From this grew *Fiber Cleaning Schools of America (FCSA)*, the industry's first independent technical training school.

Certification: Arguably, the most important development in the cleaning and restoration industry over the past 30-plus years was Ed York's establishment of the *International Institute of Carpet and Upholstery Certification (IICUC)* now the *Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC)*. Established in 1972, for years it served chiefly as the certification arm of FCSA. By the late 1970s, York determined that the IICUC required a broader base to gain widespread industry support for certification. To achieve this objective, he approached several industry associations about buying stock and appointing a delegate to serve on the IICUC's board of directors. The concept took root and by the mid-1980s effective control of the Institute was in the hands of industry associations. In 1990, York sold back his stock and was rewarded with an honorary seat on the board of directors. In 1992, the IICRC revoked York's honorary seat and ousted him from the board.

Trade associations: York recognized that the cleaning industry was fragmented and that membership in organizations that bring cleaners together to share ideas, problems and concerns would be beneficial to his customers. In 1973 York formed an association, the *Society of Cleaning Technicians (SCT)*. It continues today as the *Society of Cleaning and Restoration Technicians (SCRT)*.

Diversification: York was the first to champion carpet cleaners as carpet inspectors. This author was privileged to attend York's 1987 senior inspector's school in Dalton, Ga., to this day my most worthwhile industry educational experience. He also encouraged cleaners to enter the disaster restoration field. In 1975, he started a pilot program involving 10 firms that would later become

Disaster Kleenup International (DKI). The goal was to build a national network of independent restorers that would benefit from shared resources and a common identity. Today, DKI is a leading national disaster restoration franchise company. At the 1995 DKI annual meeting, Denny Jensen, owner of one of the 10 firms involved in the original pilot program, paid tribute to York: "If it wasn't for Ed's visionary talent, none of us would be here today.... He is truly a pioneer, a soothsayer of sorts ... for our entire industry."

Marketing: York was probably the first to recognize that the lack of marketing and sales skills were the Achilles heel of most mom and pop carpet cleaning companies. An ingenious marketer in his own right, he taught innovative, low-cost marketing concepts designed to separate them from "the crowd."

The Everyman Man

Impressive as the above-described accomplishments are, they don't do justice to the impact of Ed York on the industry. His passion was for the little guy: the independent cleaners running small mom and pop businesses, struggling to support their families. They energized York, and he, in turn, energized them. He didn't just sell them equipment or education or certification or association membership, he sold them a cause: self-respect, professionalism, success. And he would fight, passionately, for *his people* — especially when the battle was with "the elites" whom he felt didn't respect or care about their needs.

York's populist crusades are legendary: leading a group of cleaners picketing the Better Business Bureau when it threatened to ban the use of "steam" to describe hot water extraction cleaning, skewering DuPont for "anointing" Stanley Steemer as the "approved" cleaner of Stainmaster carpet. He chided and challenged "the elites" (including yours truly) whenever he thought they failed to serve the interests of the little guy.

Through Tragedy to Triumph

The costs of York's populist crusades were great. His keen insights into complex issues often were undermined by antagonism and an uncompromising style that left him with more than his share of enemies. The tragic consequence is that for all he did, in his final years he was largely an outcast in the industry he played *the pivotal role* in molding. "The elites" had taken over many of the babies he and Wanda had birthed. He recognized the irony.

It would have been understandable, then, had York turned bitter and sour on the carpet cleaning industry. But that is not how the story ended. Instead, York's final years were marked by an ever-greater reconnection with those who always mattered most to him: the small independent, the mom and pop.

Even after his declining health kept him mostly homebound, he communicated and counseled cleaners all over the country through the magic of the Internet as well as the telephone. After his death was reported, industry message boards were filled with testimonials from cleaners who had never met him, but whom he had helped in his final years.

So we are left with this: While many of the institutions he created have disassociated themselves from him, Ed York's legacy lives on — in all of the people he helped and the hearts he touched. When all was said and done, Ed York knew what was important; and he left his mark there, where it can never be erased.

On behalf of the industry bearing your mark, thank you, Ed. May God bless and keep you in His everlasting presence. (And please, Ed, don't make Him mad!)

John Downey is founder of Cleanfax and served as its editor for many years.

Ed and Wanda York photo and sidebar:

The Rest of Him

If not for Wanda, Ed York would likely have been but a footnote of a much different carpet cleaning industry. Ed was the showman, the idea-a-minute entrepreneur. Wanda was the manager in the wings, admiring the show in public while admonishing the excesses in private. Without Wanda, Ed would have been a whirling dervish — commotion without direction. With her, great things happened: a testament to the dynamic that can be created when very different personalities are bonded by love. Truly soul mates, neither would have been a story alone; together they wrote the scripts for many of the industry's biggest stories.

Remembering the Man and His Legacy

“Ed York was an innovative implementer. He thought of ways and things to fill needs for any industry he served and always had or made a plan to implement his concepts.”

Darrell Paulson
Advanced Restoration Specialists, Inc.

“Ed was a big man, full of enormous passion and a heart so big that it would hardly fit into his oversized body. He had a reputation of coming across in a gruff and intimidating manner, and wouldn’t hesitate to get in your face at the drop of a hat. So in order to tolerate Ed, you had to know him, and in order to know him, you couldn’t help but love him. He embraced the individuals who followed his teachings and who joined his networks. Because he cared so much for their wellbeing and success, he took a vested interest in their lives, personally tutoring and bring along those that required more attention.

More than occasionally he would publicly chastise those who made bad decisions or who couldn’t catch his vision of this enterprise called Disaster Kleenup. More than occasionally, I witnessed times when Ed would stand before us with tears streaming down his face, telling us how much he cared for and loved each and every one of us, and how he only wanted the very best for us – at which time he would generally switch gears, get in our face and chew us out for doing something stupid.

For those who didn’t like Ed, it was because they misunderstood him. His agendas were for the good of the whole, and he wouldn’t hesitate to take on even the biggest giants, whether they were industry or government, and he would always do it in the name of equity and fairness to all.

Dennis Jensen, CR
Utah Disaster Kleenup