

# **R & R Properties – a brief history of one family’s dream come true – Part 3**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column on July 28, 2009)**

The last segment of the Chinn family story found Rick and Ryan both joining Richard and Shirley Chinn in the family business, R&R Properties. Much like any small family business, R&R has no formal training program. Rick and Ryan shared very similar paths during their first couple of years working with the company. They were pretty much thrown into the fire from the very first day.

Both Rick and Ryan just dove in when they arrived on the job and did anything that was needed to get the job done properly. One day they might be placed in charge of the laborers. Another day, they would be the ones cleaning up the construction site. Not only did this allow both of them to gain a great understanding of the job, but it also helped garner the respect of the workers.

They saw that Rick and Ryan weren’t afraid of getting their hands dirty to get the job done. Both learned quickly that the most important trait of a leader was having the respect of others. They learned this from observing both of their parents do the same things while they were growing up in the business. So, the leadership training Rick and Ryan received was the role models of their parents on a daily basis.

Both Rick and Ryan would also shadow Richard during the day to day construction process. Richard is a very hands-on owner. He realized very early in his career that the proper quality and speed of a job would only be achieved if he were right there to make sure it was done the correct way and that problems were being solved in a quick and decisive manner. This is a trait that helps keep R&R Properties competitive in the market they have chosen. Having the building owner on hand, prevents having to go through a long decision-making process when issues arise, which usually slows down the process dramatically. R&R Properties can quickly assess the issue, and arrive at a solution very quickly.

An example of this very aspect of the company can be seen in the way a request for a fire pole was handled. R&R Properties purchased the old Roane State building from the City at public auction in early 2001 with no real prospects or plan. They did think the building had a good substructure and a good location on the Oak Ridge Turnpike. The outside definitely needed a facelift, but considering what they had done with the metal building on Mitchell and Midway, they felt confident that this building could be made into a very nice property.

Negotiations began with ASIC International, a local company started by Vig Sherrill that designed computer chips, in July of 2001. They were definitely a company with a West Coast feel. They were recruiting young engineers from top California schools and needed a facility to compete with those in Silicon Valley. After showing them what R&R Properties had done to some of the Mitchell Road buildings, they were convinced the 545 Oak Ridge Turnpike Building could be a real showplace.

Preliminary designs included a huge full kitchen with SubZero refrigerators and a huge game room for foosball and video games. Rick said, “Negotiations were going quite well until Vig’s associate came to me and told me that Vig had an ultimatum. He said Vig would not sign the lease unless we either put in a rock climbing wall or a fire pole.”

Rick continued, “I was a little taken aback, but I agreed we could work something out. After talking it over with my dad and Ryan, we decided a fire pole would be pretty cool and logically thinking, it could be easily covered up if a future tenant decided the West Coast atmosphere was not their style.

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“We did a lot of research and eventually constructed a stainless steel pole complete with a landing pad modeled after an historic San Francisco Fire Station. Apparently it is the only fire pole in Oak Ridge and possibly all of East Tennessee. Vig loved it. He estimated that 75% of his employees preferred the fire pole to the elevator and used it daily.”

Eventually ASIC was sold to Flextronics Semiconductor and the operation moved to Singapore. Barry Goss at Pro2Serve had outgrown his location and decided the 545 building was a great fit, size wise. So he moved his company there.

Barry, however, did not quite agree with the huge kitchen, game room and especially the fire pole. He took out the full kitchen, converted the game room to offices and had R&R Properties put a lid over the fire pole.

However, the lid was constructed so that it could be removed if a future tenant decided they liked the West Coast feel. With the construction of the new Pro2Serve building in late 2009, this building complete with fire pole will be available again in early 2010.

This hands-on approach worked well for both Rick and Ryan. It allowed them to figure their way through situations that were uncomfortable. It helped them grow as men. It also helped them gain a stronger understanding of the business.

Ryan said to me, “People that own small businesses don’t have the luxury of mastering a single aspect of their company. Instead, they have to know the inner workings of all aspects that make that company run. This type of responsibility forces you to manage your time well and prioritize.”

He went on to say, “As our experience level increased, we both were allowed to shift our roles within the company. After earning his real estate license, Rick began to work more closely with lease negotiations. He also began to get involved within the community. His hard work in these areas helped raise the overall profile of the company.” I agree with this as I have worked with Rick in our United Way campaigns. He brings the same strengths demonstrated at R&R Properties to all he does in the community.

In 2004, Ryan was accepted into New York University’s Real Estate graduate program. He took an 18-month hiatus from the company. Ryan said, “During my time away, I learned both asset management and finance. These skills have allowed us to further improve the overall inner workings of the company.”

Ryan thinks of himself as “the inside guy” and Rick as “the outside guy.” He believes every company needs someone to go out and sell or promote the company within the community. But he also feels that it is just as important to have someone to make sure the inner workings of the company run correctly. A strength felt in R&R is that it is important to make sure promises that are being made are being fulfilled. Having these roles established within the company according to the strengths each member brings is a hallmark of successful small businesses and R&R demonstrates this key strategy naturally.

Finally Ryan says, “I believe both my mom and dad will be working with us for a long time. It’s a company they started when they were very young. This company is a direct reflection of who they are. I’m sure they think of it as their third child. They get up and come to work every day with the same passion they did when I was young. Since we were both coming to work with them, I don’t think that’s an exaggerated

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statement. They’ve started going on more vacations in the last several years, and picked up some hobbies. But there is no doubt their most favorite hobby is this company. I don’t think they’ve ever looked at it as a job.”

Ryan’s perspective on the company is reflected in his remarks about the future, “Rick and I believe the future of R&R is very bright. We both feel a strong commitment in continuing the efforts our parents have given. The passion and work ethic are ingrained into us. Obviously, there will be a transition as our parents spend less time with the day to day. But we have spent the last several years working towards that inevitability. We have a great group of people that work with us. I believe they understand and respect what our family is about. They work as hard as they can to make sure the company is going in the right direction. That means making sure the customer is happy and that the things we’ve all worked so hard to build are well maintained.”

Regarding the Oak Ridge Marina Ryan says, “Specifically, we would love to lend our expertise into Oak Ridge’s waterfront. When we built the Flatwater Grill a couple of years ago, we hoped that it would be the spark that would ignite the momentum for the waterfront redevelopment. We believe it is one of the most appealing and important qualities the city has to offer both its current and potential residents. It would be an honor to know we had a part in helping it reach its highest potential. We understand that the democratic process needs to work its way through to a consensus. We’re confident; the process will work itself to a resolution that will be beneficial for the future of this city.”

It’s difficult to master plan R&R Properties’ future, especially in this current environment. However, the commitment held by the company to Oak Ridge results in a vision of continuing their work in and around the Oak Ridge area. It’s a community the Chinn family feels has allowed them to realize many of their goals.

An expression of their love for the history of Oak Ridge is depicted in the art chosen to decorate their offices. Ed Westcott images are used throughout. Ryan selected the images and asked Ed Westcott to autograph the photographs. He allowed me to write the captions for each photograph - and I asked Ed to help to be sure I captured the spirit he intended with each photograph.

The entire Chinn family expresses their love for this community that Richard and Shirley adopted in 1968 and wish to see it continue to evolve in a positive sense. The Chinn’s and all their extended families expect to be a part of that evolution through the years.

I hope you have enjoyed this journey into the lives of one of Oak Ridge’s most successful families. R&R Properties is much more than just a local company that has done well. The leadership learned to run that company is being used to help lead our community forward with creative and dedicated planning and execution of commercial space and new developments.

Richard and Shirley Chinn have dedicated their lives to the betterment of the community where they chose to live. Their sons, Ryan and Rick, are doing the same along with their young families. The future of Oak Ridge is bright for the Chinn family and because of their dedication the rest of us benefit by living in the same community with them.

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Fire pole installed for a company whose CEO insisted on something creative and as a result Oak Ridge may have the only such installation around



Ed Westcott autographed photographs Ryan chose to decorate R&R Properties offices

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Richard Chinn



Rick Chinn

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Shirley Chinn



Ryan Chinn