

# psp spotlight

by Flori Meeks

## Stepping up to the plate

After working for Commonwealth Telephone for 17 years, Paul Morley welcomes the chance to run the company

Paul Morley has spent most of his adult life working in the payphone industry. But since he became the co-owner of Commonwealth Telephone Co. Inc. in 2004, he has had payphones on the brain practically around the clock.

“When you’re an employee you can do your job and turn it off at 5 p.m.,” says Morley, 41. “Now I’m always on duty. It never goes away. On Sunday nights I’m back in the office planning Monday’s route.”

But Morley says he’s not complaining. He’s grateful for the health of the company, which has about 535 payphones. Most of them are in Massachusetts, but the company has locations throughout New England. And after more than 20 years in Malden, Mass., the company has a new home in Peabody, Mass.

### Family history

From the beginning, Morley has been working with a family business. His father and uncle, Peter Morley and Don Morley, spent 40 years in the coin vending industry, running jukeboxes, video games and cigarette machines. “My house was where the kids hung out,” Morley recalls. “Dad brought home video games on the weekends and snacks from the vending machines.” Morley’s family hired him to handle video game collections and repairs in 1984 after he graduated from high school.

When the payphone industry opened to independent service providers in the mid-1980s, the Morleys jumped in with both feet. “It had the same aspects as the vending market, and we had the locations,” Morley said. In 1987 the family bought its first

phones and established Commonwealth Telephone Co. “I installed the company’s very first phone,” says Morley, who was assigned to payphone installations and repairs.

Breaking into the payphone industry was slow going at first. Commonwealth Telephone was charging 25 cents a call, and most of the Bell operating companies (BOCs) still were charging 10 cents for payphone calls. “The late ’90s was when the business really started growing,” Morley says. As it was able, Commonwealth invested in new payphone technology and built up its route. At one point, the company had approximately 1,000 payphones.

The company was evolving internally, too. Don’s daughter, Ann Davis, had been working for the company and learning the ropes since 1986. Around the time the company started



Paul Morley became co-owner of Commonwealth Telephone in 2004.



Co-owner Dave Dunn and his daughter Caitlin are happy because the coin mechs are clean.



The company name is listed on the van and on employee uniforms as well.



During the winter months, Morley is never far from his shovel.

growing, Don eased into semi-retirement and gave Davis more responsibility. After he passed away in 1992, she started running his share of the payphone and vending businesses with Don's partner.

Home gaming systems had cut into the coin video game market and health concerns had practically wiped out the cigarette machine sales. But the payphone market was at its peak. In 1994, Davis sold her share of the vending business to her dad's partner and



Enjoying the rare privilege of standing on the field at Fenway Park as part of a Father's Day promotion were Morley, his father Peter and sisters Kathy and Linnea. Participants played ball in the outfield and got a tour of the dugout and locker room. Morley said it was an amazing day of play where "Williams and Yaz roamed."

bought out his share of the payphone business. Davis brought in her three sisters as partners and had Morley as service manager. Commonwealth continued to grow and prosper.

### A bold move

Around the time Commonwealth Telephone was hitting its stride, Morley was working as the company's service manager. At that point, he had experience with nearly every aspect of running the company.

Morley would have continued on in that capacity, however, Davis decided to move her career in a different direction. When she invited Morley to buy the company in 2004, he decided the timing was right to accept her offer. "The opportunity was there for me to take charge," Morley says. "I felt the industry was still there. Plus, this is what I did all of my life, and I knew the business inside and out."

Morley formed a partnership with Dave Dunn, the company's head technician. "After my cousin decided to move on to other adventures, I knew I needed help, and I wanted someone I could trust," Morley says. "Dave came aboard because he was a family friend, but he had proved himself over and over again over the last 14 years."

Being the company's co-owner has had its ups and downs, Morley says. "Running the show is obviously a positive aspect, but the negative part is the worrying," he says. "There are sleepless nights now."

Morley was especially troubled the first time he had to lay off an employee. The man was a reliable worker with a good attitude, but Morley had simply ran out of work to give him. "I was fretting over that for weeks," he says. "I've had to do that twice now. I didn't want to."

Currently, the company has four employees and



Dunn congratulates Ethel Beecy at her retirement party. Including the vending operations, Beecy was the company's secretary for 45 years.

Peter Morley, who works part-time, is the resident coin expert.

their time, I guess," Morley says. "Right now we have all of our eggs in one basket."

## Tapping into resources

Since the early years of the company, Commonwealth Telephone Co. has been active with the New England Public Communications Council (NEPCC) and the American Public Communications Council Inc. (APCC). When Davis was running the company, she was an NEPCC officer, and Morley is a long-time member.



This definitely fits the definition of "snowed in." Customers of Nina's, a c-store, were happy to have a clear path to the phone.

the part-time help of Morley's dad, Peter.

The company's success, Morley says, will depend on smart management. "It has to be run efficiently. You do have to watch every nickel and dime. You have to put out quality equipment that works so your customers are happy, and you're not spending money going out and fixing it." Morley also makes the time to check all of his phone bills for accuracy. "A bill off by \$5 every month for a year can add up to a lot for 500 phones," he says.

In many cases, it's the little things that make a difference, Morley says. He places great value in creating positive impressions. "Your employees should have clean uniforms on so people know who they are and what they are doing," he says. "You want good employees who are honest and pleasant. The employees represent the company to the public."

Morley strives to be a good ambassador himself. "Be honest and give respect to people, and you'll get respect back," he says. "That's part of my general philosophy."

In addition to its own route, Commonwealth Telephone brings in extra income by maintaining other companies' payphones throughout New England. "We have the knowledge and the technicians out on the road," Morley says. "Subcontracting out the work to us can be cost-effective for some nationwide companies."

At one point, the company offered terminals where customers could pay \$1 for five minutes of high speed Internet access. But interest in the terminals tapered off as free Wi-Fi hot spots became available. "They ran

"Over the years, they've been very, very helpful," he says. "It's been a place to share information and mutual respect for what we do." There was a time when he saw 50 to 60 people at the association meetings. Those numbers have dropped, he said, but those who attend remain strong advocates for the industry. "I believe there will always be a pay-phone industry out there," Morley says. "Public service phones will always be a necessity."

## Beyond the phones

Morley does find himself married to his company these days, but he carves out time for his passions, beginning with sports. "I am an avid, avid Red Sox fan," he says proudly. In fact, Morley usually spends his vacations visiting stadiums around the country and catching Red Sox games in different locations. He and his dad have had a standing date since 1983 to attend the team's opening day together.

Morley also plays softball and loves attending college hockey games. "In the summers, you might find me making service calls on my motorcycle," he says.

Ultimately, Morley has found ways to weave his work commitments with life in general. "Life is too short. You do need to find something you enjoy doing. Do your best at it, and success and happiness will follow." ■

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