

Episode 68 - Lori Tschohl - Burgers to Bangles to Pipe [00:21:44]

Intro: Welcome to Profiles In Prosperity, the leading podcast for residential service contractors, sponsored by Service Roundtable and hosted by David Heimer.

David Heimer: Hi everybody, this is David Heimer. Welcome to Profiles In Prosperity. I have got a great interview today for you. Lori Tschohl, is the owner of Eagle Pipe And Mechanical in Court, Ludlow, Washington. I haven't known Lori all that long, but I got to tell you right away when I met her, I realized I was talking to a really smart, talented woman who has had just an amazing career and a great unique path into our industry. She has had a great career in McDonald's. She started two jewelry stores, and then she got into our industry. So I'm really interested in hearing how she did all that. And I should also add that she's won a number of awards and been recognized for the wonderful person that she is. She's a big supporter of the Ronald McDonald House, which I am also a supporter of. It's such a great organization.

David Heimer: And she was the recipient of the Women of Influence award from the New York Business Journal in 2010. So awesome stuff. I'm looking forward to it. Lori, welcome Profiles In Prosperity.

Lori Tschohl: Hi David. Thank you so much. I'm so honored that you asked for this interview.

David Heimer: So you joined our industry after working in a variety of other industries. How did you end up in our industry?

Lori Tschohl: Been that family story. And the more I work with all the different contractors and Service Nation Alliance members, I see where family is such a core to this industry and that's kind of how I started. I have a brother that has been in this

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business for 40 years. And I had actually retired in 2011 and what should I do with my life? And at the time I had said to him, you know what, I would love to create a company for you because he was winding down his current company.

And he was going off to Las Vegas to do HVAC in that part of the country. And I actually wanted to keep him closer to Washington. So it took a few years of convincing. But once I was able to convince him to come back up to Washington, then we started working together. I'm the 100% business owner of the company and he is actually my lead guy. But without him, it would not be possible for me to even kind of go down that path. Even based on my previous history of business, you still need somebody that really understands a lot of the technical and they can help guide me through some of the different areas that I have no idea about.

David Heimer: So you started this business because you wanted to get your brother close to you?

Lori Tschohl: Yeah, I think down the way in Washington, I understand how hard people in this industry work. And I saw an individual that was working very hard, but with more of a technician mentality and knew he always wanted to go out and be working in the field. And I felt that I could help him achieve some of his lifelong goals by being able to develop a company with him. And I had felt at that point in 2011, I had already retired. So I was probably on a little bit of a different track. But that was really it. I wanted to get into this business to not only help and set up a company for him, but also I found this industry to be so fascinating after being in the restaurant industry and also retail. And once I kind of took a look behind the curtain and said, wow, there were so many opportunities. Then I was really hooked.

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David Heimer: It is a great industry, but I just got to say, I have a big sister in it. It just warms my heart to hear about your reasons for starting the business. That's awesome. So tell me a little bit about Eagle Pipe And Mechanical now.

Lori Tschohl: I still consider us more of a startup company and I know there's so many folks in this business that they've been able to just jump into it and really move it forward rapidly. It's a little bit slow at the start. And we really started to accelerate when I joined Service Nation Alliance. So that's been a huge help to us. But we do not just residential replacement and installation and service. We really started out being a commercial gas piping company. And so the name actually, and that's where the Eagle Pipe comes from, you see Eagle Gas. And so we started out with a lot of commercial gas piping. And then when my brother came up from Nevada, we then went ahead and switched into more residential.

We do a lot of light commercials. In fact, lately we've been doing a lot of libraries, we're doing like a correctional facility. So I call that light commercial, where we're doing rooftop units. What I'm actually trying to do is trying to narrow our focus a little bit because we work in quite a few different areas and we're not just singularly focused on either replacement or service. We have a variety of things which kind of distracts in some ways from the overall company.

David Heimer: Are you going to choose an area focusing on that area? Is that what you're saying?

Lori Tschohl: We're working towards more installations and services. Of course,

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service first being able to get into folks' homes and doing installations. We will keep a gas piping division just because for us, it's been very lucrative when we do a lot of underground gas piping. We'll do residential stuff, but we're trying to keep the HVAC as one and then the commercial and residential gas piping. So trying to narrow it down and getting away from all the like, can you do my furnace and all the different water tanks since we don't have plumbing. I do have an electrical administrator on board and we do that for compliance with the state of Washington. So we might venture down that path of more electrical. And at some point in time, I would like to be full service. I do have a general contractor's license. But we're trying to stick with our specialties at this point so that we can be really great at what we do before we jump into another area.

David Heimer: Makes sense, so you had an amazing career with McDonald's and I've always been curious. I remember talking to you about this when I first met you and is that franchise experience been useful for you at Eagle Pipe And Mechanical and how so?

Lori Tschohl: That to me was an experience of a lifetime. And it's interesting I did a speech for women in HVACR in their conference in Boston prior year when we still could all get together and meet. And my topic was called the burgers to bangles, to pipe plans and life experiences with the business. And everybody says, well, oh, you should write a book. It's more intriguing because how do you go from burgers to bangles, pipes? When I started out with McDonald's and I had been with them for many years, I've worked all sides of corporate. In fact, I used to turn down McDonald's Corporation daily to not go to Oak Brook, Illinois, which was world headquarters to work in Chicago. I wanted to go ahead and stay in the field, stay in my Washington area. But I accelerated pretty quickly through McDonald's.

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And when I had the opportunity to become a franchisee. That was a challenge in itself because just because you work for McDonald's, there is no way you just become a franchisee. It's a combination of the type of employee, your ability to be successful and also you have to have the money to get into it. They don't just say, hey, guess what? We'll let you become a franchisee. So that took me a while. But after having my first McDonald's, which was a very small one, I was so successful. I was able to sell that McDonald's restaurant and purchase it in Buffalo, New York. And when I was there, I actually grew that business to a \$10 million company.

David Heimer: Wow.

Lori Tschohl: So I grew it, and I knew in my heart, I always wanted to get back to the West Coast, born in the Midwest, moved to the West, moved to the East and wanted to get back to the West. And so my goal going into it was always to be able to develop that company so that it was sellable, that I could get back to Washington. And that's what I did, I worked on it. It took me a little bit longer. It took me seven years to pay for it. And then when I hit year 11, I was like, let's go. And so I did, I sold all of my restaurants. And at that point I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I retired and took some time off. And then I ended up getting into the jewelry business and ended up owning a couple of jewelry stores.

David Heimer: Before you get into that. I want to dig into just a bit of the McDonald's restaurants in Buffalo. So you were there for a total of, did you say 11 years?

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Lori Tschohl: Yeah 11 years.

David Heimer: And so you paid off the loans and you fully owned the restaurants in Buffalo by year seven, is that right?

Lori Tschohl: Yes about year 7.

David Heimer: And then how many restaurants were we talking about at that point?

Lori Tschohl: I had four, what I would consider your traditional McDonald's restaurants, but with McDonald's they go by ID numbers. And I also had two additional what I would consider called special venues. I was fortunate enough to - one of my businesses, be a large Travel Plaza on the New York state thruway. And because I had that location, I looked at it all as real estate. So I was actually able to develop some concepts that went under McDonald's and that's where I was paying my rent to. So I guess if you were to count by that, then I did have six locations. But four really traditional restaurants, two in the urban areas. So the city and one out by Ralph Wilson, Stadium in Buffalo, anybody watching the Buffalo Bills, they know Hamburg in New York. And then my end goal was Travel Plaza.

David Heimer: Wow. That's very cool.

Lori Tschohl: Yeah. And just to kind of finalize some things with McDonald's, I had worked corporate, worked in a franchise and been the owner of my own company. That's really where I was able to move my company into a much higher level of sales and everything else. But when I retired from McDonald's, I just know all the lessons I learned helped me on a daily basis. And they translated right into the jewelry business.

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So when I say jewelry and retail, I did not have a lot of help opening up these two retail locations. So what I would fall back on is everything I learned at McDonald's. I learned about processes, procedures, business, how to go ahead, set up my company, how to be able to work with top management with this new organization, just based on previous. After a period of time, then I decided I wanted to go full time in the HVAC industry. And that's what I ended up doing. I ended up taking a little turn going ahead and no longer continuing with my retail outlets. And as of 2019, then I was full-time with this HVAC company.

David Heimer: So why jewelry, why did you decide to do that?

Lori Tschohl: Well, it's interesting because when I was what I call retired and I was traveling around the world and spending my retirement for about a year and a half. I just felt that it was time to get back into the business. I wouldn't say I was too young to retire, but I wasn't at that stage that I was ready to really kind of settle down. In my entire life, I have traveled the world. So I know a lot of people when they retire, they say, I'm going to travel. I'd already been to seven continents. And I've been to about 146 different countries.

So I was not quite ready to just give up on business. I ended up looking at Pandora because I used to go to Las Vegas a lot. And I'd go through the airport and they had a Pandora jewelry store and I thought, oh, I like jewelry. And when I found out they were franchises, I thought I should be able to do this. At the time that they interviewed me, they generally were taking people that had owned other jewelry stores and were then selling them or making them franchisees. So I was probably one of the few that they elected to get into their program of being a franchisee, just because of my business

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experience and especially with McDonald's.

David Heimer: Did you enjoy it?

Lori Tschohl: I did. I enjoyed the people immensely. I will tell you, there is no difference in, let me sell you a hamburger and supersize your fries, which they don't do anymore. Would you like an apple pie on the side or can I start you with this beautiful gold jewelry? And can I add a safety chain and a couple of clips on there? No difference than walking in the door and letting me talk to you about your furnace or your IHQ product. And what can I do to enhance your comfort in your home? So it all kind of related and I did enjoy it, but just felt that it was a different time for me to kind of explore what I want to do. And once I started becoming involved with the HVAC business, I decided that's really the direction I wanted to head in. It was much more exciting. Jewelry I was a little bored with that. After developing this company, which was McDonald's, my corporation jewelry was a little bit slow for me, HVAC is a different world.

David Heimer: But you just like business don't you?

Lori Tschohl: I do. I like to develop people. In fact, I was so fortunate that when I did start really focusing on Eagle Pipe And mechanical, we actually did a DBA, Eagle Pipe Heating, And Air because not everybody understands mechanical. I was able to hire a superstar and I have found that in my entire business career, you really need to get the right people. And so the young lady that works for me now started out from day one of her first interview. She looked at me and she said, "you don't need an office manager. You need a personal assistant." I thought you know what? You're kind of right here. But she's amazing and she is the one person that can really help me move this business

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along with our guys.

So with my brother, with our lead guys, with our team and I do a lot of mentoring and always have, I've always mentored women in McDonald's. I've always been in all of the different women organization groups. It's like, I'm on that advisory board, which is a phenomenal woman in this industry. And so there's always that mentorship and that kind of really what keeps you moving forward in business. Because there's no way you can do it all by yourself. And you need those key people that have the strength that you don't have. And she is half my age, so I heavily rely on her for a lot of the technology and things that she brings to the table.

David Heimer: For most people, business success ends up being some combination of hard work, luck, skill. When you look back on your business life, what are the two or three things that you did that made a big difference?

Lori Tschohl: It's interesting because there are so many. But I think if I was to say a really key message and look at the different points, confidence. Having the confidence to move forward. I had to have the confidence to move from the state of Washington to New York, to open up and develop a \$10 million company. And when I say by myself, of course, I had a supportive family, but it was really me going out there and developing it. So confidence is one. The other thing is perseverance kind of, you continue to try to achieve something, despite all the difficulties and failures and there were a lot of failures. There's no doubt about it. I had a restaurant burned down. I had to deal with a lot of different things in the state of New York with no laws and taxes and different things.

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I worked in empowerment zones. And so that could be extremely challenging. When you work in different areas of the city where you weren't sure what could happen next. So it's really that perseverance that I can get through this and the tenacity to keep trying something. And I guess overall, it just kind of made me feel empowered that I felt I could go out and run almost any business from the business principles not the technical. I can go out and I can help with the furnace. I can go out and I can help with the water tank. But you do not want me doing the install. You want me talking to the banks, getting the money, making sure that the bills are getting paid, training and developing the people. And so just having that empowerment to know I can go out and I can really step into almost any business and run it.

David Heimer: That's awesome. So we had talked before we started recording this a little bit about COVID and tell me what was the impact of COVID in your business and how did you guys end up dealing with it?

Lori Tschohl: Well, Washington State was the first state that really started so much of all of COVID in regards to, they had a nursing home, it was identified in Washington. So we were on high alert from day one. Fortunately, between all of the Service Nation Alliance members and different webinars and calls and all the things that we were able to participate in. We had a really good plan to go into it. So we immediately notified, pulled our team together and said, okay, these are the processes, these are the procedures, this is what you'll do. We stocked up on everything we had to from gloves, masks and sanitizers, and things like that.

We actually put together a checklist. We went all over social media to say, we're essential workers, we will be out there and using technology. So we're big fans of

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Service Titans. And to be able to send out information to our customers, letting them know we would never compromise that when our guys show up that they will be in full PPE and they'll be ready to go. And having those conversations with customers. We went ahead and we tried doing some of the technicians on-demand or doing the Zoom calls or the visual, but our customers didn't want it. And even though the customers will say, you don't need to wear a mask, we'd say, no, it's just really for your safety and ours. So we jumped on it. We had a little bit of impact because of some of the new construction in Washington. Because all of that was shut down.

But when it came to doing a replacement of a system or a hot water tank, that was all great. It was some of our larger projects. And then some of them went a little on the back burner only because people weren't, they were worried more about funding. So if we were going to do a job and Amazon was going to be closing down their entire campus. The individual that we were going to be doing that job for, they were less likely to start spending a lot of money on changing out of the system or doing something until we came out of it. But all in all, we ended up doing just fine. We have continued to hire people, train and develop people and we're feeling okay about it. Even if we go for another shutdown, we'll still be in good shape.

David Heimer: So you guys grew through COVID then?

Lori Tschohl: Yes. In fact, I've got a couple of folks now that we've been interviewing and looking to add another installer, another helper. And like I said, we'll be looking for another electrician. I have an electrical admin, but I don't have an electrician. So we're still trying to grow. As always we just sat through a lot of the budget planning and set on our plan for next year. Increasing our sales, growing the different areas of the gas piping

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and the residential. I'm in a small area and we're just really trying to own that market. And it's kind of, be careful what you ask for. So we're trying to own the market. I need to be staffed up, ready to go so that when that phone starts ringing off the hook, which it has been, that I can send a team out there. So I never want to disappoint a customer all my years in customer service. That's probably the one thing that is very near and dear to me. I don't care if I take a phone call at midnight or five in the morning. If a customer needs something, we will do whatever we can to make sure that we can help them.

David Heimer: It struck me, as you were talking about going through COVID. You had just talked about the skill set and attitude that you have, confidence and perseverance. That's exactly what happened with COVID, right. You're confident that you could get through this. You did all the hard work, persevered through it and in fact, you ended up thriving and growing as well. Way to go.

Lori Tschohl: Thank you.

David Heimer: Thank you so much for doing this with me. It's always a pleasure to speak with you and I've loved following what you've done. And the background that you have brought to our industry is fantastic. And I also really appreciate how you're giving back to the industry. Your participation in women in HVACR, your participation in the AB 80 and all the things you do for Service Nation. Just want to say, thanks for doing all that. It's fabulous to have you with us.

Lori Tschohl: It's my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Outro: Looking for good ideas and interviews for our podcast. If you have an idea, or maybe you think you should be interviewed, just shoot an email to

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