

THE SPECTRUM

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From Boats *to* Supermarkets
CUSTOMER SERVICE Is the Dehoff's Motto

RWC Youth Stars in "Annie" & "As I Was Saying..."

Customer Service Has Been ‘Key’ for Dehoff’s Key Market

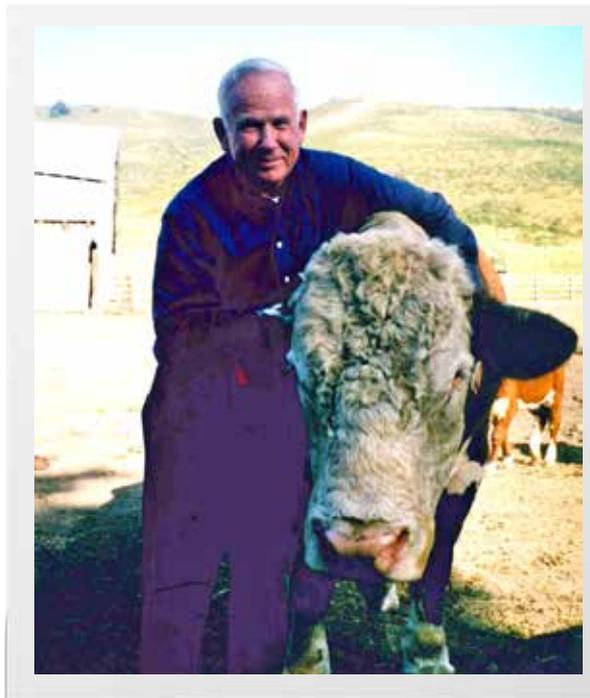
—By MONICA HO EHLERS, contributing writer



The Dehoff family, the grocer known about town, has been in Redwood City for a long time, having planted roots in 1930. “My grandfather, Emil, came from Germany and migrated across the country to settle here,” explained Chris Dehoff, general manager of Dehoff’s Key Market. Emil was a boat builder. He started a company called Redwood City Boatworks, where he built and repaired boats for years. He would continue the business until around the time of World War II. Later he would establish Dehoff Lumber, then located along the Old Bayshore Highway, south of the Port of Redwood City, involving himself in the two industries for which Redwood City is known. “Even back then our family was in a business where we took care of the local customer.”

Emil had two sons — one of whom is Dehoff’s father, Jack. “My dad was a big part of the community when he was growing up. He would ride his horse in the Fourth of July parade every year and he attended Sequoia High School,” explained Jack’s son. It was right about the time of graduation that Jack got into the grocery business, working for the Lee Brothers store in the old Five Point Shopping Center.

Throughout his career, Jack never left the industry, continuing to work for Lee Brothers in the 1960s. Eventually the chain added more stores and expanded to include Key Markets, of which Jack managed several. In 1972, an opportunity presented itself when the location on Upton and Roosevelt came up for sale. “He borrowed everything he could and bought the store from the Lee brothers and started improving it right away,” Dehoff said. “He started driving home the core principles of service, value and the quality



of perishables. The market offered good variety and service, which has steadily built up over the years.”

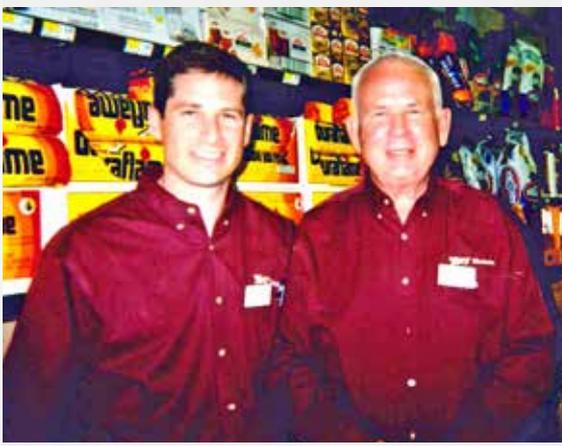
Dehoff, who has been general manager for 30 years, grew up in the business, sharing small responsibilities like sorting bottles, bagging groceries and trimming produce with siblings Mike, Pat, Jackie and Colleen. The family remains involved in covering departments like grocery, meat, produce, accounting, point of sale and anything else that needs attention.

A wink to the future and a nod to the past

Dehoff’s Key Market has stayed a successful family entity for over 40 years. Keeping up to date with current customer demand is one of the retailer’s many strengths. “About 10 years ago, we started offering more organic produce at a good price after receiving many requests at our store’s comment stand. We’ve also always emphasized local products since the early days and are doing more of that than ever before,” added Dehoff, who says they try to carry more from vendors that are like-minded (family-owned and local) as well as source items that aren’t always easy to find. “It results in a mix that you don’t see in the bigger stores.” For instance, they carry local coffees like Philz and Emerald Hills, and there is a tremendous selection of local craft beers. Some of their best-sellers are their local tortilla chips and ice cream (chocolate marble is their best-seller) — with the Dehoff’s Key Market label.

Key fosters many faithful customers who have been with them since the 1970s. Over the years they have seen changes such as a beautiful remodel in the produce section as well as many earth-friendly and “green” improvements like installing more energy-efficient lighting and replacing roofs with thermoplastic reflective material, which keeps the store cooler in the summer months, and an influx of products based on ongoing consumer requests.

Two constants remain, however: outstanding customer service — a stronghold established by Jack from day one — and excellent personnel. Throughout the years, Jack never used a computer, leaving instead an administrative person to do the payables and accounting. “It highlights that he was just a good, old-school guy who believed in the old-fashioned grocery business. He managed people



Opposite page: Jack Dehoff opening Key Market. Jack with his prized Hereford bull (the family has been raising cattle on the coast for 70 years). This page, left center: Jack and Chris Dehoff at Key Market anniversary sale in 2002. Left: Emil Dehoff (Jack's father), who came to the U.S. from Germany, settled in Redwood City just before WWII and started Redwood City Boatworks.

the old-fashioned way,” said Dehoff. He made sure that everybody used good, old-fashioned service by welcoming anyone who walked in the doors with respect and a smile. “I am lucky to have worked side by side with him. He was well-respected by the people he worked with and who worked for him.”

Jack, who is now semiretired and enjoys spending time at the family ranch in Half Moon Bay raising cattle, also served on many boards, such as the California Independent Grocers Association (CIGA).

Dehoff credits his dad for much of what he has learned in the field. “We try to continue to make it convenient for the customer by getting them in and out fast with a nice compact store that offers a good variety of purchases.” The store has a spacious parking lot and is located just two blocks off of Jefferson.

Redwood City local Pat Kelty agrees. Kelty, who has shopped there for 15 years, said, “You never have to worry about finding a parking space and they are right across the street from the Rite Aid and a shopping center. On top of that, the staff goes out of their way to help you. If you need a certain cut of meat, the butchers will do it for you while you shop. It’s just very handy. I don’t have to drive to another big store on Woodside Road when I have a neighborhood place like this one.”

Kelty, like many of Key Market’s regulars, is known to stop in on a daily basis to grab ingredients for dinner. Among his favorites are the premarinated meats for fajitas and tacos that are offered with a selection of fresh vegetables. On the weekends, he can be found ordering a tri-tip barbecue sandwich or a Polish sausage, both of which are cooked in the parking lot in front of the store.

“We marinate and tumble (using a vacuum tumbler that infuses the meat with the marinade) the tri-tips during the week and grill them up over real coal fire,” explained Dehoff.

A neighborhood store with so much more

Although Dehoff’s Key Market is considered a neighborhood store, not every patron is from the immediate vicinity. Renee Child, an Atherton resident, has been a loyal customer for more than 10 years. Child was initially introduced to the supermarket when she shopped at the Florence Street location as a volunteer for the “Senior Shoppers” — a program that delivers groceries to seniors within the community. Child lauded the family-run outfit as being a great partner to the program, which has been in operation for the last 30 years. “We shop on Tuesdays, when they offer a discount to seniors, and they designate a separate checkout line for us to make the process quicker and easier. The staff is always really helpful and nice. They actually know and greet you by name.”



“HE WAS WELL-RESPECTED BY THE PEOPLE HE WORKED WITH & WHO WORKED FOR HIM.”

Child does most of her weekly shopping at Key because they offer unique items that cannot be found anywhere else. For instance: Raymond’s sourdough bread. “I am originally from Marin and a big treat for us would be to go to Fisherman’s Wharf to get a loaf of sourdough bread and have it with fresh crab,” Child recalled. Raymond’s bread is reminiscent of that. “It’s old San Francisco sourdough, which is crunchy and chewy on the outside and soft on the inside. You just can’t get that any more without a trip to San Francisco.”

Child’s family loves the Key Market meatballs, which are made on the premises from meat that is ground fresh daily. She also appreciates being able to purchase items such as large quantities of seasonings at a good value — also hard to find if you’re not near a warehouse store.

It’s all about the people

“Our success over the years is also largely due to having great people,” said Dehoff, citing that they have staff who have celebrated retirement with them after 30 years.

“We’ve always really been focused on who we hire. We are always trying to get the right fit of employees that care about customers and love to be part of the team. We have been able to be around all these years because of the people that care.”

At one point, the grocer had various locations, including two additional stores in Redwood City as well as San Mateo and one in Sunnyvale. “We were expanding really until ’92,” explained Dehoff. “As leases came up and expired, sometimes there were not always options to renew. Luckily my dad had the foresight to purchase the property on Upton and Roosevelt a long time ago.

“Our downsizing is more of getting back to how we originally were, which has helped us to focus a little more. By having a single location, we can concentrate on just the one neighborhood. We always want to take care of the customer because we know they have more places to go than ever and they expect more.”

Consolidating three Redwood City stores would normally mean a lot of displaced workers. But this extraordinary family-run company chose to do otherwise. “Mr. Dehoff didn’t have any of the staff leave when the stores closed and they downsized,” said Jennifer Rice, who has been a cashier for three years. Thinking she was not going to get enough hours because they had to accommodate an impacted team, Rice began looking for another job and decided to pursue other career options.

After some time, when he started getting calls for references for Rice, Dehoff called her to personally ask if she would be interested in coming back. “That really meant a lot to me and reminded me how much everyone was like a family there,” said Rice. Although she is considered on the younger side of the crew at 31, Rice said she feels like she can relate to her co-workers because they all love what they do. “I could work at a bigger supermarket that is closer to home,” said the Belmont resident. “But I choose to work here because it is more than just a job. It is a second home to me. I talk with customers all day long and they have taught me so much about cooking and even about being healthier.

“We talk about anything and everything. It is such a special place. My family and friends always ask me, ‘How is work?’ and my answer is always the same. It’s always a great day at Key Market!”

