

THE SHEPHERD

Peterson & Paulson, Inc. opened their first office on the third floor of Sunset Towers in the middle of downtown Lexington. The landlord, RP Holdings, Inc., offered the space at an exceptionally good price that met their budgetary monthly allotment. I suppose it should be noted that the shareholders of RP Holdings, Inc. are Richard and Nancy Paulson. The arrangement did fit like a well-worn glove, as all five floors of Sunset Towers held all the offices of the dozen companies under the umbrella of RP Holdings, Inc.

On one of the early days of their occupancy, Rick and Tom met to lay out an overall strategy for their new company.

“This all looks good, Rick,” said Tom. “I totally agree with you that the organization of contacts and services is the first thing we should do. Such a database would give us the most flexibility to help people in most situations.”

“Yeah, with everything and everybody you and I know, it’s going to be a mountain of work to

get it all categorized and entered,” said Rick. “I made an executive decision on getting someone to help us. I hope you don’t mind, but I put on a lady as an administrative assistant. Rachel has been exceptionally good at getting things started. She is a whiz on the computer.”

“Rachel? Our Rachel?”

“That’s her.”

“I think that’s great, Rick. I didn’t realize she had those skills.”

“Obviously, that wasn’t our focus when we first met.”

“How’s Scott doing?”

“He’s doing about as well as we can expect. The treatment he’s receiving seems to be working to a certain extent. It’s tough on him physically. Very draining with not a lot left to drain, but Rachel sounds hopeful.”

“I’ll have to call my brother and get an update.”

“She still has to be with him a lot at the hospital, but I’ve gotten her a good laptop, so she’s been able to do a lot of work from a distance.”

“The marvel of the computer age.”

“I’ve also got Lenny working on the business math so we can keep the doors open.”

“Lenny?” asked Tom. “Lenny the Bookie?”

“Yeah. You probably didn’t know that Leonard Schosselman is my chief accountant and the best guy I know with a head for numbers. Last week he put the odds at 100 to 1 that we would ever get audited.”

“If Lenny’s your chief accountant, and I know you pay your people well, he must make a bundle. Why is he running book on the side?”

“You like to follow baseball as a hobby, Lenny likes to make book. Besides, he just does penny-ante stuff with people he knows now for the thrill of the numbers. Legally, he could be walking a fine line, but I trust him to do right with my companies.”

“I’ve always liked Lenny, Rick. I guess it just shocked me at first, because of his renown, sort of, in the past.”

“Well, you know, you and I walked a fine line sometimes back in college. Remember that time we hired Greta Olson, who was studying for her doctorate in psychology. We got her to study Professor Higgins and give us an analysis on his tendencies. We then used that analysis and plotted out which areas he was most likely to focus on with his tests. It was a required class and so boring that we didn’t want to have to study everything if we could get by some other way. Well, it worked, and we got good test scores. Of course, we didn’t sell our formula to anyone else, and it wasn’t really cheating, because we didn’t know what the questions were going to be beforehand or anything. We didn’t do anything illegal, but some might have considered it unethical. I just thought it to be a cool way to play the system, though admittedly walking that fine line.”

“Okay, okay, Rick. I get it. Age and life give us clearer perspectives sometimes. If you’re happy with Lenny, I’m happy with Lenny.”

“What time is it, anyway? Five o’clock. Are you ready to head home? No, wait, Nancy is working a late shift tonight, so she won’t be there. We’ll have to stop someplace and grab dinner. I know a great little ...”

“Pizza place?”

“Why, yes, Tom. How intuitive of you ... Besides, I can check up on things and sell you a pizza at the same time.”

“Yes ... Rick.”

The boys arrived at Corky’s to find an almost full house, which, of course, brought a smile to Rick’s face.

“Do we even have a table, Rick?”

“Hazel. Where’s Hazel? ... Ah, there she is.”

“Good evening, Mr. Paulson ... Mr. Peterson. Are you dining with us tonight?”

“Yes, we are, Hazel. I see you’ve got someone else sitting at our table. Just a couple of college kids. Well, I can certainly get rid of them.”

Rick walked briskly towards the table he and Tom usually sat at. He looked intense.

“Rick ... wait. You don’t have ...”

The two kids at the table and Rick talked briefly and the two boys got up and moved to the two remaining seats at the counter. Rick signaled for Tom to come over and sit down.

“Rick, you didn’t have to kick them off the table. We could have waited.”

“Relax, Tom. I know those two. We’re always messing with each other. Our negotiations always end up with them getting free pizzas. Sometimes I think they always ask for this table in hopes I’ll come in and want it so they can eat for free. It’s something I certainly would have done.”

Rick just gave Hazel a couple of hand signals that relayed the gratis meals for the lads and then added a few hand signals completing our order.

“So, are you heading home tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some things that I need to take care of in person. Then I’m flying to New York to negotiate a couple of contracts and then back home by next weekend.”

“Given any thought to moving up here?”

“Yeah, I have. In fact, I have already started the process.”

“Ah, ha! To get closer to me or someone else I might know?”

“Nichole and I talk every night, and I see her every time I come here. She is actually flying to New York with me and we’re going to catch a few sights.”

“Hmm ... this sounds like it could be getting serious.”

“I’ve already got my apartment sold and a month-to-month lease signed on one here in town that Nancy’s realtor friend, Gina, found for me. I’ve also got my eye on a little place on the west side of town that Gina said will probably come on the market in a month or two.”

“What about your businesses?”

“I’ve actually sold six of the seven that I owned. All six are now employee-owned.”

“Did you get what you wanted out of them?” asked Rick.

“More than I ever expected. The employees that now own them are the ones who made them successful. Maybe in the back of my mind that’s why I formed those particular businesses, you know, to turn them over eventually. Who knows? At any rate, they made me a ton of money and it felt good to give them back to the employees at a reasonable price everybody could live with. As part of the contract with each, I’ll be available for a one-year period for any consultation they feel they need.”

“What about the last business? I’ll bet you kept the publishing company.”

“Yeah, it’s my favorite and the one that I feel like I could keep a hand in for the rest of my life.”

“Are you going to continue writing yourself?”

“Absolutely. I just had my third book hit the one-million mark. What I especially like about the publishing company, though, is working with new authors who have unique ideas or stories, but obviously don’t have the name or the wherewithal to get a major’s interest. Every new project with every new author is like a mini-partnership. We keep

things very flexible with them. One of the interesting things that we get a lot of positive feedback from is our 6-week editor's class that we require each new author to take before we nail down a final product. Because we look for a certain range of topics that are rarely looked at by others, we can develop our own unique marketing system that increases the author's possibility for success. While we have a few rules because of our initial investment, we don't charge anything up front. If we find a major that's interested in the work later, we don't do anything to stop the author from moving up. We have a partnership royalty program in those cases where the author can catch on with one of the big boys, and it is a reduction formula according to the number of years we work together. Everyone has seemed happy with their deals so far."

"You about ready to go?" asked Rick.

"I think so," answered Tom.

"Just let me tell Hazel a couple of things and then we can head back to the house."

Rick and Tom left the restaurant in a light mist. Just as they went through the last light before

their turnoff, Rick pulled the car off onto the shoulder of the road.

“Something wrong, Rick?” asked Tom.

“Yeah, it’s that woman with the broken-down car back there. I think that’s Henrietta Baker. I’m going to go down a little bit and make a U-turn to see if she needs any help.”

As they came up behind the broken-down car, it began to rain harder. The woman had gotten back into her car and Rick and Tom had to sit in their car for a good ten minutes to wait for it to slow down enough that they could get out and talk to the woman.

“Is that you, Henrietta?” asked Rick.

“Oh, Mr. Paulson, am I glad to see you. Yes, my car just quit.”

“Henrietta, this is my friend, Tom Peterson.”

“Nice to meet you, Henrietta,” said Tom.

“Turn the engine over, Henrietta, and let me hear what it sounds like.”

Rick instructed Henrietta to do a couple more things, but nothing got the car running.

“It’s hard to say,” said Rick. “I don’t hear or see anything obvious. We should probably get it towed into the dealership, or do you have someone who has worked on it for you?”

“No, sir,” replied Henrietta.

Rick made a couple of phone calls and then said, “Zeke from Zeke’s Towing will be here in a few minutes. He’ll be taking it back to his yard for the evening and then to the dealership in the morning. We’ll wait until he gets here, and then we’ll take you home.”

“I appreciate that very much, Mr. Paulson.”

“Tom, Henrietta works in our accounting department. You’ve been there what, four or five years?”

“Five years this Friday,” said Henrietta.

“Where are you from, Henrietta?” asked Tom.

“Chicago, Mr. Peterson,” she answered.

Pulling into a parking garage, Rick grabbed the first spot he found. They walked Henrietta up

to her apartment on the third floor and said good-night.

“In the morning, call your supervisor and tell them what happened, and that I said it’s okay you may be a little late. If you can’t get a hold of your supervisor, call Mr. Schosselman. Here’s Henry Nilson’s card with his cell number. Call him and he’ll get you to work one way or the other, and then he’ll help you get your car straightened out.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Paulson. You’re a lifesaver.”

As Rick and Tom walked back toward the elevator, Tom said, “Henry Nilson, why does that name sound familiar? No, wait, Henry the Enforcer ... Seven-foot tall, three hundred fifty pounds—that Henry Nilson? ... Henry the Enforcer works for you now?”

“Yes, Henry is my chief of security. It’s a long story, but let’s just say; he got into a jam, I helped him out with the provision that he work for me, and he’s taken a different path in life.”

“You’re amazing, Rick,” said Tom. “But he’s still an imposing figure, even in a different light.”

“Occasionally, his size proves quite useful for special projects.”

“And what about Henrietta? What’s her story?”

“Another long story. A case of perpetual abuse. We got her out of Chicago, helped her through school, and put her to work.”

As they stepped off the elevator and started walking into the parking garage, Tom noticed an old gray van moving very slowly through the garage.

“Does that look a little strange to you, Rick?” asked Tom.

“Yeah, maybe we should stop and wait to let them pass.”

The van did not pass, though. When it got close to Tom and Rick, it stopped. Seven men got out of the van and surrounded them. Armed with baseball bats and iron pipes, the men demanded money.

“Here, take it,” said Tom, handing over his wallet. “Take it all.”

Rick handed his wallet over at the same time, but the apparent leader did not look happy.

“Is that all you got?” demanded the man. “Well, maybe we should just put you down and then see what else you got.”

Tom turned to Rick and whispered, “Are you packing?”

“Packing what?”

“A gun.”

“No, man. Up until now, I didn’t think I needed one.”

In one of those moments of time that seemed like a blur, a figure appeared from near the elevator. Before Tom or Rick could say anything, four of the gang were on the ground. The new man on the scene then tossed a baseball bat to Tom and a pipe to Rick.

“Okay, guys,” said the new man to the remaining gang still standing. “Anybody want to re-think where this is going to go next?”

The other three men ran back to the van, jumped in, and drove away.

“Uh ... thanks, my friend,” said Tom. “If you hadn’t come along, I don’t think we’d be standing right now.”

“You’re welcome,” said the man. “Get your valuables back there and call 911. I’ll make sure these others are secure.”

Pulling out some plastic ties from a leather bag he carried over his shoulder, the man bound the unhappy men on the ground.

“The cops are on their way,” said Rick.

“You’re pretty handy with that ... shepherd’s staff?” said Tom to the man.

The man reached into his pocket, pulled out a couple of business cards, and gave them to Tom and Rick. Stretching out his hand, he said, “Travis Sawyer.”

“Tom Peterson and Rick Paulson,” said Tom.

“You’re a ... a pastor?” stammered Rick after reading his card.

“Yeah, I’m the shepherd over at Epiphany Lutheran Church,” answered Travis. “Oh, and the shepherd’s staff, well it’s just a little something I

picked up at another time in life. It is kind of a funny coincidence tonight, though. I hold a little class, called The Shepherd's Chronicles, in the rec hall of the building once a month. This class is based on Jesus and all the references to him as a shepherd and as the Lamb of God. I try to explain what a shepherd meant to the life of the community and why Jesus frequently spoke of sheep and lambs. Then I try to put some perspective into what it means for us, today. Tonight, I talked about the shepherd's staff and all the functions it served for the shepherd. I gave some visual demonstrations on how the shepherd's staff could be a formidable weapon in the experienced shepherd's hands. I didn't think I would be continuing the demonstration outside after class."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you gave that demonstration," said Rick. "It looks like the police are here."

Three cars arrived with the driver of the first car the first to get out. He walked over to Rick, Tom, and Travis.

"Hi, Sarge," said Travis.

“Good evening, Pastor,” said Sergeant Williams. “Out doing some more evangelizing this evening?”

“I’m not sure they’ve seen the light ... yet,” answered Pastor Sawyer.

“Is everybody, well everybody besides them, okay?” asked Sergeant Williams.

“Yeah, we’re good,” said the three men in unison.

“You know any of them, Sarge?” asked Pastor Sawyer.

“I’ve seen the one on the left before, but none of the others. It’s a revolving door over at Juvenile ... Officer Smith will be over in a minute to take your statements. You gentlemen take care of what’s left of your evening.”

“Thanks, Sarge,” said Pastor Sawyer.

Officer Smith finished taking the three men’s statements and said, “Okay, you’re free to go. If I have any other questions, I’ll call you.”

“See you Sunday, Smitty,” said Pastor Sawyer.

“See ya, Pastor,” answered Officer Smith.

“Well, gentlemen,” said Pastor Sawyer. “It’s been an exhilarating evening. Don’t you think? ... Come visit us, anytime.”

“Exhilarating ... yeah, exhilarating,” mumbled Rick to himself.

“Who is that guy, Officer?” asked Tom. “I mean, I know his card says he is the pastor at Epiphany Lutheran Church, but who is he really?”

“He is a great guy to have around,” replied Officer Smith. “Take care, gentlemen.”

“I suppose we should tell the girls what happened, Rick.”

“Of course, we’d never be able to keep it from them.”

“I’ve got to learn more about this shepherd, Rick.”

“I figured you would, Tom.”

“Do you think the girls would like to accompany us to Epiphany Lutheran on Sunday? We should be back from New York by then.”

“I’m sure they would come,” answered Rick.
“But do I need to be packing?”

“Packing what?”

“A gun.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Pastor Sawyer will probably have his shepherd’s staff with him.”