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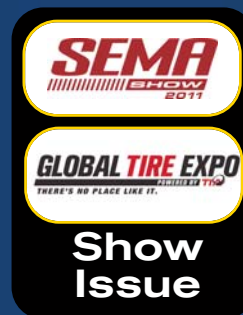
# TIRE R

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VOL. 111 NO. 10

# TOP SHOP

North America's  
2011 Best Dealer  
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# TOP SHOP

## NORTH AMERICA'S TOP SHOP WINNER



# VIRGINIA TIRE & AUTO

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## By Denise Koeth, Managing Editor

To say Virginia Tire & Auto is a family-run business is a vast understatement. Yes, founder Myron Boncarosky works closely with the next generation, daughter and son-in-law Julie and Mike Holmes – but it goes far beyond that.

The dealership's roughly 400 employees, spread out among its 11 locations in the greater Washington, D.C., area of northern Virginia, truly are an extended family. And seeing everyone – from Boncarosky to the store managers, techs and shop maintenance employees – of Virginia Tire & Auto interact with one another is proof of the deep respect and open communication with which the company is run.

Boncarosky, Julie and Mike know that the dealership would not be a success without each and every person that makes up the Virginia Tire & Auto “family” – a fact that they state often. And this is very fitting, since the TIRE REVIEW Top Shop Award honors the dealership as a whole, rather than solely

recognizing the owner or founder.

“Since the beginning, I have never focused on dollar amounts or profits,” Boncarosky says. “I knew that if I worked hard and hired honest, hard-working people and treated them well, things would eventually fall into place.”

Things have indeed fallen into place – and then some – which is the reason Virginia Tire & Auto is the winner of the 2011 TIRE REVIEW Top Shop Award presented by Ammco/Coats.

### Humble Beginnings

Boncarosky, who grew up near Pittsburgh as the son of a steelworker, moved to the Washington, D.C., suburbs in search of work once industry back home began to decline. The fast-growing north Virginia area was a stark contrast from his hometown, one that brought a refreshing change and many opportunities. “I’ve seen what happens to a town when its main industry disappears,” he notes.

By 1976, Boncarosky had been work-

ing as a sales rep with Texaco for several years. Growing frustrated with the amount of time decision-making took due to the many levels of bureaucracy involved, he dreamed of going into business for himself.

Boncarosky says he told his wife, Carole, for years that he was going to start out on his own. But opportunities came and went, until he found the right one. “I had opportunity after opportunity and I would study it and get enthusiastic, but at the last minute I’d back out. So when I finally got an opportunity in Fairfax, Va., my wife said, ‘Myron, it sounds like you’ll be very successful. If you don’t do it, do me a favor – quit talking about it,’” he recalls, laughing.

That opportunity was Main Street Shell, a gas station with three adjoining service bays. And while Boncarosky had



a certain level of business skill, he wasn't exactly prepared to operate the gas and service station. "My first day going into that business, the former owner handed me the keys and turned to leave," he says. "I said, 'Wait, I don't even know how to turn on these pumps,' and he said, 'You're a smart guy, you'll figure it out.'"

From that first day, Boncarosky approached the business differently. He wore a nice shirt and tie to work each day. He made sure Main Street Shell looked different than other gas stations – with a clean, uncluttered appearance and landscaping that would neatly fit in among a neighborhood of proud homeowners. "I worked seven days a week putting together a team and figuring out the business," Boncarosky explains. "The more I got involved, the deeper my passion grew."

When asked about his goals back in the beginning, he says in earnest, "I just wanted to survive. I figured if I worked twice as long and made the same amount of money I had been making, but I was happy, I'd consider it a success. If you do things right, profits will come. You're always rewarded for good performance."

And that performance shone through. Before long, Main Street Shell was recognized as the highest volume Shell station in terms of auto repair in the eastern half of the U.S. After building a core of trustworthy, dedicated employees – some of who are still on his team today – Boncarosky expanded, adding other Shell stations and a Texaco gas/service station in Springfield, Va.

But he soon discovered that being profitable in the gas business isn't all it's cracked up to be. With each year Boncarosky saw increased profits, his monthly rent also increased – 30% each year for three years in a row, in fact. That was when Boncarosky knew he needed to go in a different direction.

Boncarosky opened Centreville Automotive, his first Goodyear-branded tire and repair shop, in Centreville in 1988 and applied the same principles there as he had at Main Street Shell: honesty, expert service, attention to detail, strong customer communication and treating employees with respect. For each additional location that followed, Boncarosky chose managers he knew he could count on and gave them the freedom to lead their respective staffs.

Beginning in 2007, another page in the company's history was turned when the business underwent a major change, rebranding each location as Virginia Tire & Auto – but more on that later. The dealership also added Bridgestone, Michelin and Toyo brands to its long-time Goodyear, Dunlop and Kelly tire offerings.

Today, 35 years after Boncarosky opened Main Street Shell, the 11-location Virginia Tire & Auto consists of two gas stations with limited service offerings, one gas station with a full service operation, and eight separate locations that offer a full array of tire and vehicle service, as well as state emissions and safety inspections.

## The Business Today

Perfectly situated among the fast-growing D.C. suburbs – Ashburn, Sterling, Centreville, Chantilly, Falls Church, Gainesville, South Riding, Springfield, Vienna and Fairfax – Virginia Tire & Auto draws from an extremely large base of customers. In fact, Loudoun County, Va., where a handful of the stores are located, was the fastest-growing county in the U.S. in 2010.

The company's 2010 gross sales totaled \$37.3 million, with an additional \$24 million in gasoline sales. Virginia Tire & Auto's sales are solely from retail, of which 23% was from tires last year, while 77% was from vehicle service.

The dealership saw sales and profits increase each year during the economic recession. While that fact proves Virginia Tire & Auto is doing something right – a lot of things, actually – it's also a benefit of location. "Because of federal spending in the area, the unemployment rate here is 5%, which is lower than elsewhere in the country," Mike explains. "Also, even though people may be deferring maintenance, they aren't buying new cars. So ultimately this has helped our business."

Land for two additional locations already has been purchased, and a new Virginia Tire & Auto store will open within a year, according to Boncarosky. "We're not in a big hurry to grow," he says. "We'll take advantage of opportunities, but just to grow for growth's sake isn't what we're about. If we can't do a certain amount of business in a given location – and do it well – then we won't go there. We thoroughly think through each move and expansion to make sure it makes

sense for us and for the market.”

Another step forward for the business was the 2010 land purchase of the gas station properties. Now that the properties are owned by Virginia Tire & Auto, Boncarosky will never have to face the problem of rising leases as he did in the earlier days, and the company is better able to control costs – and its future.

Virginia Tire & Auto is a member of the Goodyear Tire & Service Network and Bridgestone’s Affiliated Dealer Network, with different locations belonging to each program. Between all the stores, about 12,000 tires are kept in stock on a daily basis. Inventory – in addition to payroll, accounting, human resources and most training – is controlled for all locations out of the company’s central office in Fairfax. With same-day delivery available from wholesalers in the area, including American Tire Distributors and Terry’s Tire Town, getting the right tire quickly is never a problem. This allows the dealership to offer customers any tire brand they choose, in addition to those brands mentioned previously that are regularly stocked. Virginia Tire & Auto also has a fleet of box trucks used to transport tires between locations, if necessary.

“We’ve thought about entering the wholesale market, but decided we want to focus on retail and not bring in that added complexity,” Mike explains. “Also, there’s really no hole in the wholesale market here that needs to be filled.”

## The Next Generation

With Boncarosky pouring his heart and soul into the business and Carole, who had worked at World Bank but joined him shortly after he opened Main Street Shell – she handled bookkeeping and payroll – daughter Julie grew up surrounded by the family business. “As long as I can remember, it was dinnertime conversation,” she recalls. “I worked my first summer at Main Street Shell in high school. I always knew I would be involved in the business.”

After high school and college, Boncarosky encouraged Julie to enter law school and work in that field for a period of time. “I knew it would give her an added perspective and teach her to think differently,” he says. “I couldn’t think of anything better than for her to gain that knowledge and work with some top-drawer people before she got fully into the family business.”

Julie made the transition from her law firm to Virginia Tire & Auto in July 2010 and now oversees marketing, community relations and customer service, as well as serving as the company’s general counsel. She and Mike, whose background is in finance, met in college, and after getting to know Boncarosky and working the books one summer, Mike knew he wanted to be a part of the company’s future, as well. He joined the business in 2007, and after spending time at the front counter learning the “odds and ends” of the business, eventually came into his current role, which is overseeing IT and operations.

“I never had a question in my mind about letting Mike into the business,” Boncarosky says of his son-in-law. “He wanted



**Virginia Tire & Auto founder Myron Boncarosky, with wife Carole, daughter Julie Holmes, and son-in-law Mike Holmes.**

that and I knew he had some great ideas and skills. He and Julie have a lot of instincts, enthusiasm and abilities and they have done many impressive things.”

While Virginia Tire & Auto traditionally relied on direct mail and advertising in local newspapers and magazines to attract new customers, Julie was a big part of ushering in a shift to database marketing. Using existing customer information, Virginia Tire & Auto now sends holiday cards, plus factory maintenance, inspection and oil change reminders, as well as monthly e-mails to roughly 30,000 customers.

The dealership’s online presence also was revamped, with a website (vatire.com) redesign earlier this year and an increased focus on search engine optimization and social media, mainly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. “We also buy Google keywords and advertise on Angie’s List,” Julie says. “We take every opportunity to update Virginia Tire & Auto web listings on sites where consumers may search for auto repair or tires (RepairPal, AutoMD, Google Places, etc.), including our suppliers’ websites.”

This summer, the dealership also tried Living Social, offering area residents a complete vehicle inspection, oil change and tire rotation for \$19.95. The offer was a success, with 1,500 deals sold.

Up until 2007, the business functioned as separate locations, each operating under its own trade name, like Centreville Automotive, for example. To create a stronger presence in the area, each store was rebranded as Virginia Tire & Auto, a change that took about two years to fully complete.

In order to strengthen the Virginia Tire & Auto name and ensure the company’s high standards were being communicated to all employees and carried out for customers across the board, Boncarosky and his team invested heavily in corporate infrastructure, technology and processes to ensure a more cohesive, consistent experience. “From 2008 to 2010, we modernized or invested in point-of-sale, accounting, time and labor, and business intelligence systems so that each store uses identical processes and systems,” Julie wrote in Virginia Tire & Auto’s Top Shop entry.

The new infrastructure improved communication between employees and stores, as well as the timeliness and quality of information. Corporate personnel were added to improve and systemize hiring practices and employee training.

“It is now easier for customers to identify Virginia Tire & Auto,” Boncarosky says of the locations that now have a consistent look, with the company’s name and logo displayed more prominently. “I think they feel more comfortable with the credibility of Virginia Tire & Auto.”

## Extended Family

Out of its 341 full-time and 69 part-time employees, more than 50 have been with Virginia Tire & Auto for 10-plus years – a sign that staff is treated well and given room to grow. And while the dealership now sees the second generation of many customers’ families, it also counts the sons and daughters of loyal employees among its ranks, as well as a handful of happily married couples.

Myron, who visits each location once a week, knows all employees by name and greets them with a smile and a handshake. Further proof of the employees-as-family mindset of the organization is John Miller, store manager of the Centreville location, who personally thanks each of his employees and gives them a hug or handshake on paydays.

The dealership offers its own training for new employees, in addition to manufacturer training, customer service/sales and telephone training, and a host of technical training. Of particular success have been sales and store manager “Boot Camp” sessions that feature hands-on training and simulated practice exercises. In addition, salespeople undergo a four-hour program on telephone skills to learn how to better communicate with customers.

“Virginia Tire & Auto pays for all training classes deemed beneficial for an employee in their continued growth with our company,” Julie wrote in the entry materials. “We interpret this very loosely so as to enroll as many of our employees in training programs as are interested.” As a result, the dealership’s techs have over 185 individual ASE certifications.

Employees are mentored and moved to positions that best fit their abilities and personalities. And open positions, when possible, are filled from within by a promotion, Boncarosky says. “You’re forced to grow a business in order to keep people,” he explains. “If you hire a general tech and never give them the opportunity for growth, they aren’t going to remain satisfied and they won’t stay long. You have to mentor them and encourage them to grow, and then provide an opportunity for them to do so.”

“If employees aren’t happy, they won’t be able to handle customers to the best of their ability,” Mike adds.

Boncarosky has formed partner relationships with four Virginia Tire & Auto location managers, offering them the opportunity to buy into their respective location and have a greater say in that shop’s profits and operations. But partner or not, each location manager has control over hiring and day-to-day operations of his shop. Quarterly meetings are held between all managers, as well as more frequent conference calls, to ensure all ideas, problems and key information are shared.



## Community and Customers First

Customers at all locations can expect honest, prompt service. Most waiting areas have a large window into the service bays, so they can watch while cars are being worked on. That level of transparency, in addition to doing whatever it takes to correct any perceived problems, helps build a sense of trust, Julie says.

“We build relationships with our customers and if a mistake is made, we go out of our way to make things right with the customer,” she adds. “We often say, ‘You don’t know how good we are until something goes wrong.’ Integrity is at the heart of everything we do and customers know that.”

Customer waiting rooms feature Wi-Fi or computer workstations, TVs, complimentary refreshments, a children’s play area and up-to-date reading materials. Each location has a dedicated shuttle driver, and select locations offer loaner vehicles.

One thing that sets Virginia Tire & Auto apart is the quick lube and state inspection lanes at many of its locations. These lanes feature digital curbside check-in and are designed for customer convenience. The Gainesville location even offers extended hours – 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. – for state safety and emissions inspections, so customers can come before or after work.

Customer feedback is encouraged via social media and the dealership’s website. In addition, 50 customers are called each month and offered a brief survey, and customers are sent a thank you e-mail after each visit. Any customer problems or concerns go directly to Boncarosky, Mike and that location’s manager for fast resolution. “Getting that feedback empowers managers to correct the situation and adapt processes from there on out,” Mike notes.

Another way of connecting with customers – both existing and potential ones – is through community interaction. Managers are able to choose particular causes they’d like their locations to support, running the gamut from churches to schools to community sports and neighborhood events. In addition, for more than 10 years the company as a whole has maintained Calamo Park in Springfield, Va., as a gift to the community – a deed that costs roughly \$15,000 each year.

And through the participation of all locations, Virginia Tire

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& Auto has undertaken some much larger projects – many of which benefit the U.S. armed forces, since there's a strong military presence in the surrounding communities.

Earlier this year, the dealership teamed up with Any Soldier to collect donations of goods to send to military members stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Items collected at all 11 locations were enough to fill 115 care packages. "So many of our customers and employees come from military families that we felt sending care packages to our troops would be a great way to give back to our community while thanking the brave men and women who are sacrificing everything to serve our country overseas," Julie says.

In August, the company's South Riding location served as a stop during Crossing of America, a 12,700-mile journey across the U.S. to honor wounded troops, fallen soldiers and their families. For the stop, Virginia Tire & Auto held a rally and presented a check for \$1,000 to the Spirit of Liberty Foundation, which organized the event, in honor of local fallen hero Sgt. Sean Callahan, 23, a former employee and Marine recently killed in Afghanistan.

The newest dealership-wide charitable cause the business plans to undertake is "Wheels for Work," which provides reliable transportation so lower income community members can get to their jobs.

"Instead of just making donations to a cause, we wanted to participate in something in which we could use our skills and resources to personally make a difference," Julie says, adding that individuals can apply on Virginia Tire & Auto's website under the "community" tab.

"We want to be part of the communities where our customers live and work," she adds. "They have supported us all these years and we're proud to return that service."

And it's that sense of pride and duty – for the community, for family, for employees and for customers – that makes Virginia Tire & Auto worthy of the title of 2011 TIRE REVIEW Top Shop Winner. **TR**

## In Their Words

As paramount as family and employees are to 2011 TIRE REVIEW Top Shop winner Virginia Tire & Auto, perhaps no one can tell the dealership's story better than those who are a part of it.

"I like constantly trying to do the absolute best we can – and you can see our people pride themselves on a job well done. That's their store, where they spend their time. They're there early, making the best decisions. Their standards are higher than anything you could ever put in a manual."

–*Myron Boncarosky, president*

"People don't like getting their vehicles serviced; they treat it as a necessary evil. I'd like to think we can be that place where people want to go, where they don't dread having to visit."

–*Marty Kelliher, managing partner, Ashburn location*

"Management really cares about helping employees. Everyone has to work for a living – we want this to be a facility where people want to come to work."

–*Dave Wishnow, store manager, Cascades location*

"This company was built on personal relationships and that's what draws people here and keeps them here."

–*Kris Crouch, controller, Fairfax corporate office*

"Myron is a person who never gives up. He's very hard-working and he believes in perfection. Whether it's a tire repair or a major job, they are all important to him."

–*John Miller, store manager, Centreville location*

"Each market is different, each manager's style is different and the culture of each location is a little different. So having the freedom to operate locations differently is a great benefit."

–*Keith Roscoe, general manager, Gainesville location*

"Here there is no cap on technician training. There's an inherent risk that if you train techs they'll take their talents somewhere else. But if they're happy and you provide them with opportunities, they won't leave."

–*Alan Wietz, store manager, South Riding location*