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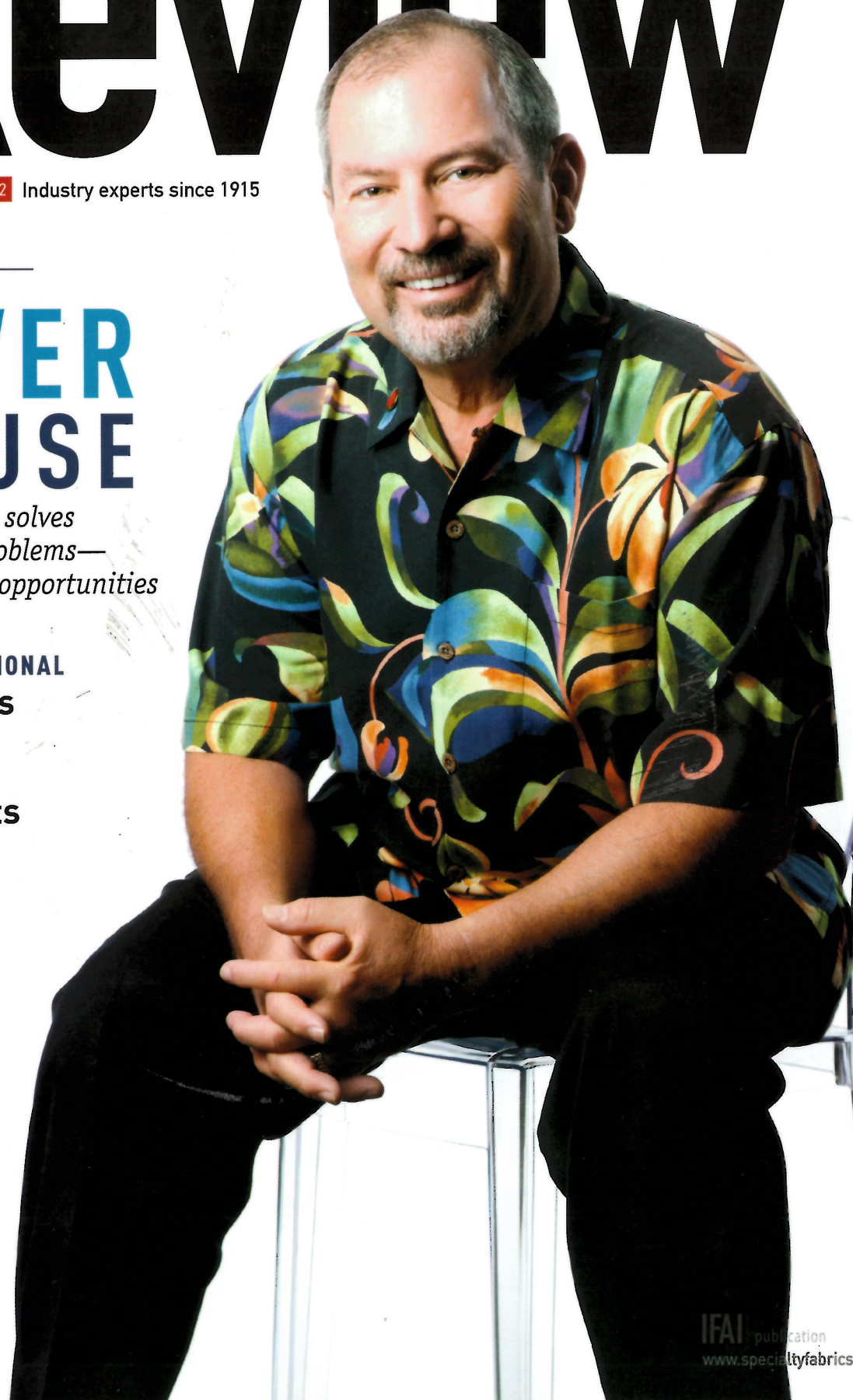
POWER HOUSE


*Gary Barnes solves
customer problems—
and creates opportunities*

**FLEXIBLE & FUNCTIONAL
fabric interiors**

**Progress in
safety products**

**IFAI EXPO 2012
Show Preview**

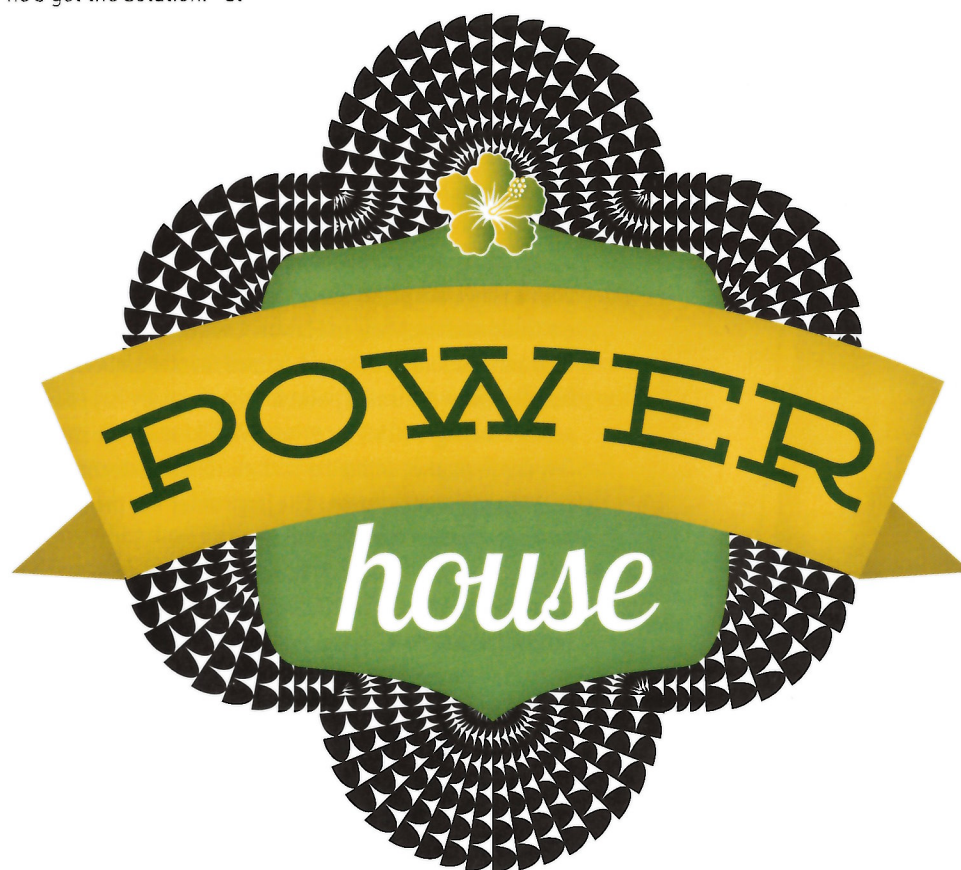


A full-page photograph of a man, Gary Barnes, standing outdoors. He is positioned in front of a wall made of horizontal wooden planks. He is wearing a light-colored short-sleeved button-down shirt with a yellow and green floral pattern, and dark trousers. He has a friendly expression and a slight smile. To his left and in the foreground, there are large clumps of tall, dry, golden-brown grass. The background behind the grass shows some green foliage. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day, and a shadow of the man is cast onto the wooden wall behind him.

GARY BARNES TAPS INTO
TENACITY AND CREATIVITY
TO SOLVE CUSTOMER
PROBLEMS.



Gary seems like the kind of person who considers a problem, thinks about it and keeps thinking until he's got the solution. ~st



“In the Navy when the ship’s underway and there’s a problem, you can’t just say ‘I’ve got a headache and I’ve got to go home.’ You’ve got to do something,” says Gary Barnes, MFC, CDR, USN-Ret., co-owner of Tropical J’s Inc. in Honolulu, Hawaii. “And having the will to get the job done no matter what means everything in this business, particularly when you work in a tight community like Hawaii.”

When Gary first set foot in Hawaii in 1987, it was as a naval intelligence officer returning to the United States after being assigned to the American embassy in Moscow. “The plan was to stay in Hawaii for a few years and then move back to Washington, D.C. to finish out my career in Naval Intelligence,” Gary says. “But the previous year had been the coldest winter on record in Moscow, and when my wife Jeri stepped off the plane in Honolulu she said: ‘That’s it. I’ve seen the world. We’re staying here.’ So I challenged her to find something to keep me here because I really did love my military career.”

ONE GOOD IDEA

Together the two came up with the idea of making hand-held umbrellas using Hawaiian prints. Jeri started the business in 1989, and Gary helped out when he wasn’t busy with his duties for the Navy. “The more focused she got on the business, the more involved I became,” Gary says. “The next thing we knew, our garage was a DuPont®-licensed fabric enhancement laboratory.” The two formed Tropical J’s

Gary Barnes, MFC,
co-owner

Tropical J's Inc.
Honolulu, Hawaii
www.tropicaljs.com

IFAI member since 2004
Most valued benefit: Master
Fabric Craftsman certification



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customers the first thing
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are you trying to solve?'



(named for their three sons Justin, Jonathan and Jordan, who now work in the business), and purchased a used silkscreen dryer, which Gary tuned up and digitized, then added a custom-made padding machine to apply Teflon® to fabrics. They bought Hawaiian prints, Teflon-treated them, and manufactured the umbrellas.

"No sooner had we delivered our first working hand-held umbrella with a Hawaiian print, than someone asked us to make an outdoor patio umbrella with a Hawaiian print," Gary says. Tropical J's joined the Hawaiian Handcrafters Guild and the Made in Hawaii Council, and soon orders for both hand-held and outdoor patio wood-framed market umbrellas kept the emerging business busy. A turning point for the company happened when Jeri met the general manager (GM) for Hyatt Waikiki at a trade show. The GM ordered a few dozen market umbrellas with custom silkscreened Hawaiian designs as part of a major renovation. The large order was the catalyst for Gary and Jeri to move production out of the house.

LEADERSHIP TRANSFERS

In 1993, Aloha Tower asked Tropical J's to assist in an awning project that was overwhelming another contractor. "The awning company Aloha Tower had hired couldn't take on more, and they needed more. So they asked if I could help with the project. So I hired an awning guy. I walked onto this major construction site and it was just like being on an aircraft carrier in rehab," Gary says. "I felt right at home. I went to work doing things I would normally do as a division officer for the Navy getting a project done." That same year, Gary retired from the Navy to work for Tropical J's full time—and now it's the largest awning company in the state.

Although Tropical J's is a company that makes awnings and wood-framed market umbrellas, Gary notes a distinction between his company's products and the customer-focused entity that it actually is. "Yes, we're an awning company," he says. "But essentially we work to please our customers. When we meet with our customers the first thing we ask is: 'What problem are you trying to solve?' And then it ends up that a good half of the time we end up selling them something different than what they had in mind when they first called us."

THERE'S ALWAYS AN ANSWER

For Gary, solving a customer's problem often means designing a new product—and at times that new product can serve as a marketing tool for future projects. "A vendor that had provided us interior roll-up screen curtains for a residential customer contacted us to consult on a job for a restaurant at Nordstrom," Gary says. "They wanted extremely large exterior shade curtains—to cover a 100-by-13-foot area—and my vendor didn't have anything that would work for that large of an expanse."

Gary visited the site, which was at the edge of a lanai—precluding the option of attaching a side rail to anything. "I had seen another awning company in town try to use wires to hang a curtain off the end of an awning to guide it down and it had failed in the wind," Gary says. "I realized that the concept was good; he just needed to use a heavier marine-grade wire system."

Gary discussed the project with a friend who was a general contractor. The contractor helped him secure the hardware and come up with a design.

The two presented shop drawings to Nordstrom's people—and they liked it. “That project has become one of our greatest marketing tools,” Gary says. “At 11:30 every day the motorized awning comes down, and guests dining there ask about the company who designed it.”

NETWORKS

Staying connected with contractors, architects and developers is one way Gary has furthered the company's production. Late in the 1990s Tropical J's began providing services for the burgeoning eco-tourism market—designing and manufacturing tents for Molokai Ranch and later working on plans for Oahu's famed north shore in Haleiwa. Though the project in Haleiwa met with local opposition that stopped construction, it did provide a connection to a new opportunity for Gary.

In 2000 he took on a project with the same developer to plan, design and install structures for a project in Bermuda. He spent eight months supervising the installation of the project—spending three weeks in Bermuda on the construction site installing tents, and one week in Hawaii managing his company and installations in Honolulu. “It was one of those things that ultimately turned out well, but at the time it hurt our business tremendously for me to be gone so much,” Gary says. “But when I came back, because of my experience essentially living on a construction site for eight months, we were able to get our awning contractor license rather easily. And as a result I became motivated to think about how our company could become a larger company and expand what we were doing.”

SNAPSHOT | FULL CIRCLE



When Tropical J's was at a financial crossroads in 1997 and co-owner Gary Barnes needed a sizable project to keep the company afloat, Molokai Ranch asked him to redesign its “tentalows”—canvas-covered frames—to house its guests. One ranch owner on Molokai—an island situated between the heavily touristed islands of Oahu and Maui—was repurposing the ranch into an eco-tourism destination.

“The frames were rickety and the fabric was flappy in the high-wind environment,” Barnes says. “Guests were complaining that the noise was keeping them up at night.”

Barnes worked with Eide Industries to design and manufacture the frames, and Tropical J's designed and manufactured the tensioned fabric. Molokai Ranch ordered 250 tents, which was just the type of order Tropical J's needed.

Molokai Ranch closed in 2008, but some of the tents are now looking at new life. “A nun acquired a tract of land from the Bank of Hawaii and we've moved 14 tents to the property to refurbish as accommodations for the homeless,” Barnes says. “That project saved us. Now we're able to turn around and use it to give back.”

Your company has a good track record with repeat business. To what do you attribute that?

I don't know how many times we've received calls from people saying: ‘We had this guy on the job and he won't answer his phone and the job's not done and we're in trouble.’ Then they turn to us. You've always got to be available to your customers. Treat your customers well, and they come back.

How do you design awnings and structures to stand up to the salt, sand and wind of island weather?

The rust issue has been our biggest problem. Powder coating doesn't necessarily solve it, so we've gone to epoxy coatings that are electrostatically applied, which works beautifully. There are very few coaters here, so we do the coating ourselves.