

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

This issue, we shine our Member Spotlight on Mike Zalis, owner of Green Village Garage.

Start by telling me a little bit about yourself. How and when did you first get involved in the industry?

Back in the '80s and '90s, this location was owned by Eddie Sagendorf, a good friend of former NJGCA Executive Director Jerry Ferrara. My father worked here with Eddie, and from the time I was a teenager, I was here too, pumping gas. In 2000, Eddie retired and my parents, Glenn and Diana, took over. I had just graduated from high school, and I was on my way to Seton Hall to pursue a Business Degree. After graduating from college, I got into the business full-time; first as a mechanic, and then in 2007, I starting to get more involved in the front office and take on more of a managerial role.

In 2008, we made the transition from a franchised location (Sunoco fuel being supplied by Mohawk), to fully independent. This move alone -- switching to an independent -- increased my fuel volume 40%. We got fuel more regularly, with less constraints, better flexibility, and higher margins.

While this move provided a significant boost to the gas-side of the business, my decision in 2009 to enroll in ATI's 30-month Re-Engineering Program really brought my repair business to the next level. Over the course of the 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ year program, my repair sales more than doubled, and my business grew from a 3-man shop to a 7-man operation.

Wow, that's incredible! As you know, Automotive Training Institute (ATI) is an NJGCA Member Benefit Partner. What can you tell other shop owners who have been trying to find ways to boost their business?

I would absolutely recommend ATI. I truly cannot say enough good things about them. Their Re-Engineering Program did more for my business than I could ever imagine. Even as an alumnus of the program, my coach has helped me take



my business up another notch. I always look forward to my weekly phone call with other ATI participants so that we can bounce ideas off each other and discuss whatever issues we might be facing. Not only does ATI focus on strategies to save money, increase efficiency and identify new revenue streams within your business, but by

connecting you to other participants throughout the country, they provide small business owners with the opportunity to benefit from the support of the entire ATI community.

What a valuable service! How else have you seen your membership in NJGCA benefit your business?

I feel the same way about NJGCA that I do about ATI. NJGCA has played an integral part in the continued success of my business. NJGCA has been by my side every step of the way as my business has grown. For example, Debbie helped me get registered as a PIF. When I hire new guys and they want to attend the Emission Technician Education Program (ETEP) or get certified as Emissions Repair Technicians, NJGCA is right there to make that happen. And as DEP regulations change, NJGCA always helps to simplify the process.



College might not have taught me how to run a repair business, but it did help me to realize that I can't run a business on my own. Recognizing when I need help, and knowing where to look to find it -- that's been one of the critical elements of my success. And throughout this whole experience, NJGCA has been one of the most useful tools in my toolbox.

Is there anything that you would like to see NJGCA do more of? How can we continue to improve the services that we offer to Members?

As I mentioned before, I learn something new in each weekly phone call I have with my ATI support group.

I would love the opportunity to have the same types of discussions with my fellow NJGCA members. I think it would really benefit the membership if NJGCA was able to coordinate a couple of informal gatherings so that people could get together and discuss whatever is on their mind. My ATI team includes shop owners from all over the country, who wouldn't be able to provide suggestions on who to call if I need to repair a pump, replace a tank or change suppliers. An NJGCA-sponsored event would provide the perfect forum for all of this valuable information to be shared between local small business owners. (*Editor's note: please turn to page ___ to see a schedule of events that NJGCA is hosting this spring.*)



What do you do outside of work? Are you active in local community programs? Do you donate your time or money to any particular causes?

Aside from trying to spend as much time with my wife and two-year-old daughter as possible, I am also the Captain of the Green Village Fire Department, where I've been a member for 10+ years. I am one of the main daytime officers, and since I live locally, I respond to calls in off-hours as well. In addition to donating to Firehouse fundraisers, the shop also works on their equipment and helps with breakdowns.

Finally, as you can see, the shop sponsors a number of local recreational tee-ball teams. Go Mets!



Where do you see the industry going? How do you think it will change in coming years? Are you concerned about any legislative/regulatory issues that might affect your business?

The one thing that I definitely see happening in the near future is more electric cars and more diesel. I would not be surprised by a possible phase-out of gasoline and shift to some sort of alternative fuel. For that reason, I have done some hybrid service technician training myself, and I have mechanics at the shop who have also taken classes focusing on hybrid servicing and repairs.

Speaking of repairs, I have been closely following the Right to Repair issue in Massachusetts and in New Jersey and I think that NJGCA has done a commendable job of advocating for the small business owners on this issue. While I am thrilled that progress has been made, I still see far too much evidence of manufacturers trying to find any roundabout way of pushing out the independent. The reality of the situation is that we exist because dealers do such a bad job... Their customer service is terrible and they price themselves out of the market, at a level that's not even fair to the customers. Without a real solution to address this issue, consumers and independent shop owners will continue to suffer. I know how much progress NJGCA has made on this issue in recent years and I look forward to joining NJGCA's efforts to finally pass a Right to Repair law in New Jersey. ■