

EXECUTIVE Q&A WITH DAVE YOUNGE

Late-life change was right choice



Dave Younge poses in front of a curved galvanized steel Flex-C Trac wall, which is the signature product of his company, Flex-Ability Concepts. (PHOTO BY CHRIS LANDSBERGER, THE OKLAHOMAN)

BY PAULA BURKES

Business Writer
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When Dave Younge decided to change careers at nearly 50, he said people thought he was out of his mind for leaving something he'd done his whole life.

Younge, an owner-manager of Flex-Ability Concepts and Progressive Stamping & Fabrication, had worked some 25 years in the restaurant industry, including 15 years with Casa Bonita Restaurant. Restaurants were all he knew.

Fast forward two decades and Younge, 71, said he absolutely made the right choice in following what he believes was a calling.

Flex-Ability Concepts manufactures flexible track products. Its patented Flex-C Trac was the first metal or wood framing product that could be curved by hand right on the job site, Younge said, and has become the brand by which all others are measured.

Meanwhile, Progressive Stamping makes tens of thousands of stamped or fabricated pieces and parts, including hot/cold rolled steel, stainless steel, galvanized and galvanized steel, copper, brass and aluminum in coil and sheet stock. It also processes some plastic and wood components.

"We're creating things that make a difference,"

Younge said.

Examples of manufactured pieces include seat belt parts, harnesses for backpacks, and various parts for the aviation, energy and medical industries. Recently, Younge said, Progressive Stamping helped students at Oklahoma Christian University create a stand for an affordable assistive communication device that allows people with ALS to communicate by eye recognition.

The two companies, which employ 35, have some 30 active customers, mostly in central Oklahoma, Younge said. However, some clients, like Johnson Controls, have national and international reaches, he said.

From his leased 95,000-square-foot facility at 5500 W Reno, Younge recently sat down with *The Oklahoman* to talk about his life and career. The following is an edited transcript:

Q: Tell us about your roots.

A: I was born some 65 miles north of Detroit in Port Huron, then a town of about 25,000, located in the thumb area of Michigan. My family lived at the base of the Blue Water Bridge, which was the major artery into Canada. When I was 4, we moved to the Detroit suburb of Livonia. My father, who died at 93, was a Baptist minister and my mother, who was a homemaker, is 92 and still active. I'm the oldest of four; I have a sis-

ter and two brothers.

Q: What were the highlights of your childhood?

A: It wasn't easy being a preacher's kid. Everybody assumed I was a goody-two shoes. Later, in my "aha" years of my late 30s/early 40s, I learned to appreciate my upbringing, including my parents and Sunday school teachers, for laying the foundation for my beliefs and what's important to me. During high school, I delivered the evening edition of the "Detroit News" and for several summers in high school and college, I worked the midnight to 8 a.m. shift on the manufacturing line of a Canada Dry bottling plant in Detroit. I learned later that my mother took in laundry to help pay for my tuition at Wheaton College in Illinois. The summer before my senior year, I sold dictionaries door-to-door in south Georgia for the Southwest Book Co. The race riots were going on in Detroit, and it was hard for me to hear Georgians speak ill of African-Americans. I'd learned early on that we're all God's children and that everybody has value.

Q: And after college?

A: I married before my senior year, and after graduation, my wife, Lynn, and I moved back to Port Huron, my birthplace and her hometown. With a bachelor's in mathematics, I'd considered becoming a math teacher, but through

tutoring in college, I realized I'd make a horrible one. Instead, I worked for Youth for Christ in Port Huron and wasn't any better communicating with kids. I wanted to be a manager and found my opportunity in the restaurant industry. I worked five years as a supervisor for Sveden House in the Detroit area, and then the following three, I sold food management services for public schools, colleges and factories outside of Detroit and across Michigan.

Q: What brought you west, and to Oklahoma?

A: We vacationed in Denver with my wife's family, and loved it; especially the cool mornings and sunny days. In August 1978, I accepted a general manager position with Casa Bonita in Denver, and three years later, the company offered me a big promotion to the GM job in Oklahoma City. It took a few years for us to get over the fact that we don't have mountains in Oklahoma, but now we can't imagine living anywhere else. Oklahomans have a genuine care and concern about their neighbors, and for us all to do better. Years later, we lived a brief two years in Little Rock, where I managed an affiliate restaurant, before returning to Oklahoma where I sold point-of-sale systems to restaurants for two years for Data Terminals. In May 1998, it became

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Position: Owner/manager of Flex-Ability Concepts and Progressive Stamping & Fabrication.
Websites: flexibilityconcepts.com and psi-okc.com.
Professional/community involvement: President of Central Oklahoma Manufacturers Association, which hosts annual legislative forums and bimonthly presentations on topics of interest to manufacturers; member of the U.S. Department of Commerce District Export Council, which helps companies navigate exporting their products; advisory board member for the Engineering Academy of Oklahoma City Public Schools; supporter of Dream It Do It Oklahoma, which promotes careers in manufacturing; and Sandler Training of Oklahoma.
Age: 71.
Childhood home: Livonia, Michigan.
Education: Wheaton College, bachelor's in mathematics. He worked as business manager for the college newspaper and yearbook, and sang in the men's glee club.
Neighborhood: Rustling Hills in northwest Edmond.
Family: Lynn, wife of 50 years (They met on a Christian cruise on the Detroit River the summer before his junior year in college/her senior year in high school and married a year later.); daughter Michelle Ninness, an Edmond homemaker, and Sean, a Houston musician and drum teacher; five granddaughters; and three great-grandchildren.
Pet: Kirby, a 17-year-old miniature schnauzer.

obvious I needed to dedicate myself full time to Flex-Ability Concepts. We'd attended our first trade show in Reno and there was so much interest, we thought "Holy Cow, we need to ramp up!" In the beginning, another owner and I handled all of the strapping, crating up, truck loading and taking orders. Lynn and I were new grandparents, and I was more than ready to leave the restaurant industry that, with its long hours, weekend and holiday work, cut into family time.

Q: How did Flex-Ability Concepts and Progressive Stamping & Fabrication come about?

A: My son-in-law, Mark Ninness, worked with Frank Wheeler, the inventor of our signature product, the Flex-C Trac galvanized steel curved wall. We couldn't find anyone to license it from us, so we formed a company in 1995 and patented it. Today, there are five partners, including Frank, Mark and me as owner-managers, and two of Mark's family members as inactive partners. We acquired Progressive Stamping, which was one of our subcontractors, in 2003. It's provided an opportunity for growth for us, especially during the 2008 downturn in construction.

Q: Your personal mantra is "to leave people better than you found them." How so?

A: I once noticed a fast-food restaurant shift

manager who was working as a cashier give free meals to her friends who'd cut in line. When I got to the register, I told her that I was sure her employer wouldn't think that was OK; that she'd likely lose her job if I called her boss. She was quite upset. I told her I wouldn't call the owner and that I'd pay the tab for her friends if she'd commit never to doing that again. I have no idea if it was effective, but felt that was the best way to encourage the right behavior. Conversely, I recently was at a meat counter and the worker was really hustling and being very friendly. I complimented him on being such a hard worker and remarked that he seemed to be carrying the load for his coasting co-workers. He said he felt he needed to do his best, no matter what. I said he should maintain that rare attitude, and handed him my card as a contact. With just a few moments of extra effort, we all can do something special for so many people. When I was in my mid-20s, a stranger in a Kip's Big Boy Restaurant did similarly for me, when he told me I had a lovely family and hoped I recognized it. There's not one thing in life at which all of us couldn't be better. The blessings come when we go through the turmoil and change, because that's when we learn what matters.

Tap your credit cards for spring break savings

BY MELISSA LAMBARENA

NerdWallet

If you've been stuck in that familiar post-holidays, pre-summer travel dry spell, chances are you've had your spring break dates circled on the calendar for some time.

You've likely already set your destination and bought your tickets, but there are still ways you can save money on your trip, especially if you have the right credit card.

Whether you're bound for an international adventure or a visit to the in-laws, here are some features and benefits you may be able to enjoy.

No foreign transaction fees

Some credit cards charge foreign transaction fees, generally 1 to 3 percent of each purchase, every time you use them internationally. If you charged \$2,500 on a credit card with a 3 percent foreign transaction

fee, it would cost you an additional \$75.

"My husband's family is from Canada," says Kimberly Tate, mother of two and blogger at Stuffed Suitcase. "The first trip we ever went up there, we had a card that didn't have the no foreign transaction fees, and we were just shocked."

After seeing foreign transaction fees add up, Tate no longer uses credit cards that charge them.

Checked bags or travel credits

Airline credit cards and premium travel credit cards typically charge annual fees, but you can offset that cost if the card offers free checked bags or travel credits.

If you're loyal to one airline, your airline credit card can save about \$25 on checked bag fees each way. That's \$50 round trip, and potentially more if the card offers free checked bags for travel companions. For fre-

quent travelers, the savings outweigh the annual fee.

Premium travel credit cards can offer annual travel credits that may include checked bags, airfare, in-flight purchases and more, depending on the terms of the card.

Airport lounge access

Instead of splurging on meals at the airport, see whether your credit card offers airport lounge access. If so, you may have access to complimentary meals, beverages, Wi-Fi — even a shower, depending on the lounge.

"If you're someone like me that travels all the time, and you add up the meals that you get at the lounges, it does end up saving you money," says Anisa Alhilali, who lives in Norwich, England, and runs the blog Two Traveling Texans. "Plus, it's a nicer environment than sitting out at the gate or eating at the food court."

TSA Precheck or Global Entry credit

If time is money, find out whether your credit card will reimburse you the application fee for TSA Precheck or Global Entry programs. These programs can offer faster clearance through airport screening, and some cards offer application credits of up to \$100.

TSA Precheck, offered by the U.S. Transportation and Security Administration, gives you access to special security lanes at 200 airports nationwide. Global Entry, operated by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, gives you the same benefits as TSA Precheck, plus expedited customs screening when you're re-entering the U.S. With either program, if you're approved, your status is good for five years.

If your spring break isn't for another several weeks, you may be able to get through the application process in time for takeoff. If not, consider it for summer travel.

Insurance benefits

Take advantage of the insurance benefits your credit card may provide. Some cards, for example, feature lost luggage reimbursement. And some offer trip cancellation insurance, which may provide refunds — up to a certain amount — on airfare or other travel expenses if you book the trip with the card but

later have to cancel.

A few credit cards offer primary coverage when you use them to rent a car. Primary coverage allows the card issuer to cover damages first without having to get your personal auto insurance involved. To qualify, you have to decline the rental car agency's collision damage waiver, which also saves you money.

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