

# Virginia's Shields Self Storage Thrives on Family Atmosphere

By Tom Comi

When you combine a father who is a savvy businessman with a son who understands the importance of modern technology and the ever-changing nature of today's business environment, the result is one of the most successful family storage chains in the country.

Thomas Shields and his son, Todd, have been combining their individual expertise together for more than 20 years at Shields Self Storage in Virginia, and they currently own and operate seven facilities. Thomas, who started in the home-building business with Shields Construction Company in the early 1970s, erected his first storage facility in 1975 when the industry was in its infancy and not the lucrative and fast-growing segment of the commercial business sector that it later went on to become.

"I realized there was a need for quality self storage in the Waynesboro/Augusta County area," he said. "I built my

first 24 units and they were rented immediately. I have continued to expand every few years due to demand. We now have approximately 1,400 units and are currently in the process of adding more."

Todd, who serves as CEO from his office in California, referred to his father as "the consummate visionary" and said much of their success today is due to his dad following his gut 36 years ago.

"After convincing his bankers of the mini-warehouse concept (as it was first called), the needs of the local market and its profitability, my father built his first facility," Todd said. "From there, he added one building after another; and when he ran out of space at that location, he built at another location, then another."

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*Thomas Shields (pictured with general manager Kim Baze) has been involved with self storage since 1975.*



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### Pro-Family

Thomas takes great pride in running a family business, which explains in part why his niece Vicki works part time in the maintenance department and his brother Richard oversees the auctions. He sees it as an advantage over his competitors.



*“The blending of our two approaches has worked well for us and has made for a good working relationship.”*

*Todd Shields  
Shields Self Storage*

“Your family is always looking out for your best interest,” he reasoned. “Decisions can be made quickly and with more flexibility. Customers are from your community and relationships are built. It is good to keep the business in the family and keep the family name going. It takes years to build a good business.”

Todd claims a family-owned business provides a level of customer service that can’t be matched.

“We can offer more personalized and hands-on service by the management rather than the frustrating bureaucracy that tends to be experienced at many large facilities,” he said. “If our site manager can’t help you with your problem, they will direct you to the general manager, who will work diligently to help you and who can directly contact

my father or me should the need arise to get a prompt resolution.”

The general manager Todd speaks of so glowingly is Kim Baze, who is not related to the Shields but has already been made to feel like a member of the family in the few years she has been on staff. She gets to work closely with both the father and son and marvels at the unique perspectives they bring to the table.

“They genuinely care about each of the employees and take the time to get to know us,” she said. “They ask our opinion and listen to us. Tom and Todd make me feel like they are here to help me, not dictate to me. I speak with Tom on a daily basis and inform him of any issues that he needs to be made aware of and what action our team has taken. I learn a lot from his vision and guidance. Todd pushes me to constantly educate myself on all aspects of self storage and even more subjects he thinks are important for my professional development.”

### Father-Son Dynamic

The two perspectives Baze mentions—she refers to Thomas as a “bottom-line person” and Todd as a “detail person”—is something the father and son embrace. The very fact that they don’t see things the same way all the time has served Shields Self Storage well.

“My father can decide on whether to proceed on a project based many times just from his intuition and gut feeling,” Todd said. “I tend to be very analytical and much more conservative in my approach to a project. However, we give each other due consideration of our differing methods and approaches and respect the other’s point of view. The blending of these two approaches has worked well for us and has made for a good working relationship.”

Thomas admits it took some time for him to come around on some of his son’s suggestions, but he says they have a very good working relationship.

“He has brought a lot of new technology and professional touch to our business,” he said. “I resisted some of the ideas Todd brought to me, such as paying at the gate and



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security cameras everywhere, but it seems customers like the additions. At first, I was really worried about spending so much money at one time. It had been a long time since we remodeled the older facilities, and it has paid off. We now have all our facilities in excellent condition and are very proud of them.”

That remodeling and rebranding began in 2008 and included updating all computer and management systems, installing state-of-the-art security, designing and developing a new main office and renovating all of facilities.

“We updated our computer and software systems, so that each site manager had access to real time data at each location,” Todd explained. “We also updated and enhanced our security systems to be centralized at the main office, and we consolidated all the separate phone lines to one number that can be answered and accessed as if each site manager was at the main office.

“Also, it was at this time that we created an updated brand identity to embody and advance the new changes and to maintain our position as leader in the markets we serve,”

he added. “The rebranding included changes in the building and color schemes and a new logo to represent a uniform and renewed identity of our business.”

Among many administrative changes, Todd and Kim worked together to develop a standard operating procedures manual and an employee incentive program. In addition, he implemented the use of a new tenant lease/addenda that not only better protected the company but also clarified the lease terms for the customer.

So what’s the outlook for Shields Self Storage? If you ask Thomas, he says, “I hope Todd will come back to the east coast and run the business in the near future, because I am getting ready to retire.” And that sentiment is not lost on his son. Todd is not sure where he will live a few years from now, but he does realize that self storage will always be a part of his life.

“I envision the expansion of the family business into carefully selected new markets based on the same philosophy that my father originally founded Shields Self Storage on 36 years ago,” he said. “And just as my father, I plan to stay involved in the storage business for as long as I am blessed to do so.” ♦



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