

# From Interior Design to Self Storage to Author, Marcy Gerhart Can Tell You Some Stories

By John Dunlap

When Marcy Gerhart was retiring from the world of interior design, the last thing she probably ever envisioned herself being was an author—about self storage, no less. But she is, indeed, the author of *Our American Stuff: The Heart and Soul of Self Storage* and one gets the idea that her ability to find the humor and poignancy in a subject like self storage meant that she was destined to be a writer all along.

Her book (available on Amazon.com for \$9.99) is based entirely upon her observations and encounters with customers at Second Attic Storage in Bessemer, Alabama, a facility she owns, operates and manages. The facility has been open since 2006 and has 200 units, 44 of which are climate controlled. She has room for 100 more units but is currently using that space for trailers and U-Haul equipment.

She figured the job would be fairly cut-and-dried, but little did she expect to hear the kind of stories that her customers would pass along—especially when their payments were overdue. She also realized that she was becoming attached to some of her customers, and to the animals who sometimes made their way to her door. So she started taking notes on the people, the critters, their stories and excuses and came to the conclusion that a book of anecdotes was entirely possible.

“I had no idea how connected I would get to some of our renters,” Gerhart says. “I envisioned collecting rent, taking money to the bank, and watching “Judge Judy” in the down time. But when the first few incidents occurred with Patrice, Celia, and Mr. Bestor, the stories became family discussions. My son Neal, who teaches literature, urged me to start making notes. Then, when *Storage Wars* hit the air, we all agreed that my stories were the flip side of that show. What about the people behind the auctions who were losing their things? I even thought about calling the book *Auction Wars Flipped*. More stories evolved, and I have no doubt, there are more down the road.”

## From the Ground Up

So how did an Alabama woman become so consumed with self storage?

“I retired from the interior design field and had some money to invest,” she says. “Knowing someone who owns four storage properties, my interest in this business was peaked. So I sent my daughter, Kirsten, and son-in-law, Jackson (a structural engineer) to the Expo to further check things out. I then found some property and turned the project over to Jackson. In six months we were open for business. I began enjoying retirement as a storage owner, sharing day-to-day management with Kirsten.”

Soon thereafter, the business started yielding the kind of stories and tales (many of them tall tales), that would have Marcy, Kirsten and Jackson chuckling at home...or just shaking their heads in amazement. Notably, the excuses customers came up with for late payments, or no payments at all. (See excerpts from *Our American Stuff* on page 24.)

But Gerhart was not an insensitive corporate monger just on the lookout for money. She cares about her customers, especially those trying to battle their way through tough times. Her empathy can be found all over the book.

“When people rent storage, it is most often due to some transition in their life, so there is usually a story to go with it,” Gerhart adds. “Certainly, every storage owner/manger has had similar situations as those in the book. However, the larger facilities probably do not have time to be involved. And to be truthful, the greater percentage of our renters are a blur to me. But these few who are in the book could make anyone’s day a lot more interesting if they chose to pay attention.”

“This is basically a quiet, boring, low key business, about as warm as the metal doors and walls. I wanted that at first, having left the hectic and stressful life of an interior designer. When one of my renters asked if I was going to

*See Grhart, page 22*





(My checklist)

What I need in a payment processor.

- 1. Can you match PPI's experience in the self storage industry and payment processing?
  - Integrated payment solutions with the top software packages.
  - More than 60% of the top 50 storage providers process with PPI.
  - Since 1995, PPI has supported more than 50,000 customers.
  - Processed over \$6.5 billion in credit and debit card transactions last year.
- 2. Do you provide a credit card processing platform at no additional cost?
- 3. Is 24/7/365 free customer support available?
- 4. Do you own your technology and customer support staff? Or are you outsourcing and/or using a third-party vendor?
- 5. Do you offer a PCI compliance program with a breach reimbursement guarantee?
- 6. Do you offer expert assistance if I run into trouble with any PCI compliance investigation?
- 7. Are check services (ACH processing) available for integrated and standalone payment processing?
- 8. Do you include fees such as annual & membership in your final pricing proposal statement?
- 9. Do your proposed rates and fees come with a price guarantee?



## Are you gambling your business away to a low-cost processor?

Now is the time to find out.

Take this handy checklist to any processor to see if they match what Payment Processing, Inc. (PPI) offers.

Gerhart, from page 20

write about her, I said, 'No, you're boring. You pay your bill! Then along came Brenda, Patrice, Sarah, and all the others. They certainly added interest to my days. They have given this business a sense of soul.'

### The Well-Placed Aside

One way that Gerhart conveys her feelings about the subjects in her book is to add pithy comments as asides. In many cases they reflect what pretty nearly any owner/manager in self storage would feel. Sometimes, they are just funny asides.

"I stated in the introduction to the book that this was not a philosophical commentary, but that my amateurish thoughts would be inserted," Gerhart says. "At first, I was putting them in parentheses. It was Neal's idea to put them in italics. We can't always say what we really think, what with customer service and all that. So along with what was unfolding in real time, I added what was really going on in my twisted brain."

Gerhart also has some comments, good and bad, about the effect *Storage Wars* has had on the industry. On the one hand, she admits that the great majority of what people store is junk; on the other hand, the number of people turning up for auctions has spiked considerably.

"We shake our heads at *Storage Wars*," she says. "Of course, it would not be good entertainment to show the many

units with nothing but junk. What *Storage Wars* has done is bring more people to our auctions. Before we would have about five show up. Now we have 40. They even come with flashlights mimicking the TV characters. Being the self appointed auctioneer, when the crowd is looking in at a unit with 20 black plastic bags and that's all, I encourage the bidding with "The diamond ring is in the back right corner!"

And then there are the animals who have showed up at her facility.

"I have always rescued animals. When the three animal incidents occurred, they were as much a part of our Second Attic life as the people stories. I thought they should be included in the book."

And does she have a favorite story or character from her book?

"My favorite story was about Jim," Gerhart concludes. "He is a real life example of what so many families are going through. His perseverance should encourage everyone to find a way to keep going. My second favorite was the last story: B29, B59, C1. When you read the laundry list of what is in those units, you must admit that we can speak with authority on the subject of storage, since those units belong to me and my family. And we don't pay our bill! We are the epitome of "One man's junk is NOT another man's treasure." ❖

See page 24 for an excerpt from Our American Stuff.

Try the New **EZ** cylinder locks designed to fit all of the **BEDEL** system latches. The **EZ** cylinder locks have a dynamic new keyless installation. You just push the lock into the **BEDEL** and it locks without the keys. You just need the key to unlock the unit. Each lock comes with 3 special nylon headed keys in a tamper proof package. The New **EZ** cylinder locks have an overlock function built in where the manager can use the **EZ** overlock key to turn the lock so that the past due customer cannot use their key until they have paid the past due rent. The **EZ** lock comes in a twin pack keyed alike for customers who have 2 units.

**Chateau** 

**Chateau Products, Inc**  
P-800.833.9296 • F-800.235.1405  
1820 47th Terrace East, Bradenton, Florida 34203  
978 Spice Islands Drive, Sparks, Nevada 89431  
[www.CHATEAUPRODUCTS.com](http://www.CHATEAUPRODUCTS.com)