Trust is Key: 2020 Warren Pike Award Recipient Bill Childers

The PTDA Board of Directors has presented the 2020 Warren Pike Award to Bill Childers, an industry veteran with more than 30 years of volunteer service to PTDA and the PTDA Foundation. The Warren Pike Award is presented in recognition of an individual’s dedication, passion and commitment to the power transmission/motion control industry. PTDA Executive Vice President and CEO Ann Arnott spoke with Bill from his home in Florida about the award, the industry and Bill’s volunteer work.

Ann: Bill, congratulations on receiving the Warren Pike Award! Tell me a little bit about your thoughts on achieving this award.

Bill: When [PTDA Nominating Committee Chair] Jim Halverson called to let me know I was truly surprised, and my thoughts were, “Wow! Look at those who received this award recently: Andy Nations, John Masek, Barb Ross. They did way more than I did.” But I got a nice surprise. PTDA has been the most consistent thing throughout my career—besides my wife. It’s an honor and means a lot.

Ann: What do you think the top challenge is right now for distributors and manufacturers in the PT/MC industry?

Bill: To me, there are two big things that are going on. First is the growing strength of the end user. One of my most interesting experiences occurred when two of the big beverage guys joined up and went after the manufacturers for a quote on one of their big product groups. I will never forget the phone calls I made to the distributors who had those two contracts. It was a huge negotiation with both, and I am proud of how it turned out and still believe the trust we had in each other was the key. But that friction continues at every level. It’s unbelievable.

The second big challenge is the online business model, which is growing consistently by the younger generations coming into purchasing. All of the old relationship people—and most of them are old guys like me—are retiring. What a challenge—for a small distributor especially.

Ann: You spent time in your career as both a distributor and manufacturer giving you a unique experience. Tell me about distributors and manufacturers working together.

Bill: Boy, you could spend a long time talking about that. To me, it’s the relationships and the trust that those relationships build that really makes for a good bond whichever side you are on. You’ve got to work hard to build that trust.

The challenge is, if you’re a distributor, the manufacturers you work with are all competing with each other and they’re also working with many of your competitors. And the reverse is the same on the manufacturer’s side. Man, trust is so important! I’d say that’s probably the thing I’ve been the proudest of—trying to stay neutral in all that and being honest with people to build that trust. It really is difficult.

Ann: Bill, what I enjoyed the most were the efforts of the PTDA Foundation to bring young people into the industry. I will always remember the efforts we made in Detroit at Henry Ford Community College, led by John Masek. From time in the classroom to meetings with their counselors to speaking at high schools and even doing job fairs, we made every effort to make industrial distribution a desired career for young people. The other part I enjoyed was driving contributions with phone calls to all my friends. I know they now miss that yearly call!

Nowadays, you’ve got to have great technical capabilities in both product and IT. The companies that are capable of putting technology in the hands of their salespeople and engineering staffs are the ones that are going to win.

Ann: What projects did you work on when you were in PTDA’s leadership that you’re particularly proud of?

Bill: What I enjoyed the most were the efforts of the PTDA Foundation to bring young people into the industry. I will always remember the efforts we made in Detroit at Henry Ford Community College, led by John Masek. From time in the classroom to meetings with their counselors to speaking at high schools and even doing job fairs, we made every effort to make industrial distribution a desired career for young people. The other part I enjoyed was driving contributions with phone calls to all my friends. I know they now miss that yearly call!

Ann: What would you tell your 30-year-old self about your career? What advice would you give yourself?

Bill: I can’t really complain as the balance between my career and family life worked well. Probably my only regret is not getting involved with PTDA sooner. I have to thank Mary Sue Lyon [former PTDA EVP] for asking me to volunteer. It’s been a blast!