

The Blonder Group Sells White Way of TN to Nashville Family

By Candy McCampbell / Tennessean Staff Writer

White Way Cleaners has a new owner, putting a wrinkle in a business trend in the process. The family-owned, Nashville-based dry cleaning and laundry business will continue as just that. White Way, owned by Wade Elam's family since it opened in 1931, was sold to the Hummell family -- brothers Art, Ross and Reed, with backing from their father Burt, who moved to Nashville 20 years ago with Robert Orr/Sysco. The transfer to local ownership bucks a recent trend in which locally-owned businesses are being scooped up by out-of-state companies. Just Tuesday, H.G. Hill Food Stores announced its plan to sell its operations to Fleming Cos. Inc. of Oklahoma City. Fleming plans to close Hill's distribution center and sell its 14 individual stores to independent buyers. Purity Dairies went to Illinois-based Dean Foods. Sunshine Grocery's new owner is Wild Oats Markets Inc. from Colorado, and Davis-Kidd Booksellers was sold to Joseph-Beth Booksellers from Ohio. In the White Way deal, the Hummells were looking for a business. Elam, whose two children weren't interested in the family business, was looking for a buyer. "What we liked about Wade's company was the tradition. It's a service business," Art Hummell said. The buyers and seller would not discuss revenue, but Elam said he has tried to have 8% to 10% gains each year. The Hummell brothers bring backgrounds -- Ross in finance, Art in procurement, Reed in marketing -- that should mesh in an operation. They will have Elam's on-the-job guidance for the next year and his consultant services for the next five years. The service business includes dry cleaning and laundry from the main plant at 1200 Villa Place, near Music Row; and branches in Green Hills, West End, Belle Meade and Brentwood. The company also operates a pickup and delivery service that has generated more than half its business since the 1980s. Ironically, White Way started by giving a discount to cash-and-carry customers. The 50 employees at the main plant, fed by the 30 to 35 others in the branch stores, handle 22,000 pieces of laundry and cleaning each week, from cotton shirts to be starched stiff to a beaded gown that has to be handled with extra care. The future may include larger delivery areas, a possible second processing plant and a more sophisticated means of tracking garments, said Ross Hummell, CEO of the new team. A possible tracking aid: a miniature radio transmitter embedded in a garment to be used to follow it through in the cleaning process. White Way already marks shirts to be laundered with bar codes that can tell where the garment is, how often it comes in and how many times it has been laundered. Route expansions could also include pickup and delivery at downtown office buildings, Hummell said. "We want to see controlled growth in the company, and new routes are promising," Hummell said. "People don't have time (for) their dry cleaning." Instead, customers tend to drop off laundry and cleaning early in the week. "Monday and Tuesday are wash day(s) in America," Elam said. We also tend to retrieve it on Friday and Saturday. Elam will help the new owners learn the intricacies of the business and monitor coming changes in technology -- which usually means major expenditures every three to five years. Some things change; some don't. "I still come in about 7 a.m." Elam said.