

## IFRA Welcomes Craig Riecks, Paxton IGA, to its Board of Directors

IFRA welcomes Craig Riecks, owner of the Paxton IGA in Paxton, IL, to its Board of Directors. Craig was one of two new directors elected during the Association's annual Conference, held September 28 and 29, 2010, in Champaign, IL. Following is a profile of Craig.

When Craig Riecks learned in 2002 that the competition in town would soon become much stiffer, he decided that it was time to re-tool. "We got wind that a Super Wal-Mart was coming to nearby Rantoul and realized that we had to attack – be proactive and step it up."

Craig's strategy was to create an environment of total customer service, and a key element of that strategy was training.

"Within the first month, we bring every new employee to our home for training with my wife Candi," Craig said. "She sits down with them and they role-play and discuss potential scenarios." These orientation sessions also employ training videos with discussion to follow.

"Candi is a fabulous teacher," Craig continued, "and by using this approach, we know within the first 30 days if someone is not going to work out."

"People really appreciate our taking the time to emphasize what our expectations and standards are for customer service. Service is so large for us because it's a big deal in a small community, especially with the traditional store format."

Craig's customer service efforts are supported by his wholesaler SuperValu, which assigns an account manager to work with him one-on-one. "They really



*Craig Riecks, owner of the Paxton IGA, is a new member of the IFRA Board of Directors. He is pictured here with his wife Candi and their three sons (l to r): Caiden, 5; Carter, 11; and Corbin, 13.*

get me fired up and we've been able to take advantage of their strategic pricing system known as STEP Pricing.

### A Rich History

A town of 4,600 people, Paxton, IL, was once home to six grocery stores, although the population is relatively unchanged. The community was formed when, in 1850, the federal government offered the newly formed Illinois Central Railroad parcels of land along a corridor from Chicago to Cairo that included the area now known as Paxton. The town was named after Sir Joseph Paxton, an English architect who was interested in organizing an English settlement in Illinois. Although this concept never materialized, the town became the county seat and was soon home to many Swedish immigrants who came to the area.

The original Paxton IGA was a 4,000 sq. ft. supermarket constructed in 1954. The store went through two ownership changes before Craig's father Ken and his partner Glenn Arnold purchased it.

Prior to that, Ken Riecks had worked in training and as an account manager for food wholesaler SuperValu's Champaign division. Like his father, Craig polarized to the food business early on, taking a job with Jerry's IGA in Urbana, IL, while attending school at Parkland Junior College.

"Jerry's had drive-up delivery," Craig said. "The customers would shop and buy their groceries and then we would put them into their car at the curb. I'd be outside so much in winter, my face would be red from the cold."

Like many young people, Craig soon had the urge to see other places, and took a construction job working for the father of a friend in the Hudson River town of Nyack, New York. Later he moved to Tampa, FL, where he also worked construction.

When Craig moved back in 1987, he took a job working at the store owned by his father and his partner.

"When I first arrived on the scene, I got all the messy jobs," Craig laughs, "like

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*The Paxton IGA's annual Kids Fest is a big draw for the community. This year's event featured cold-blooded animals, including a tortoise, snakes and a friendly alligator named "Bubba."*

cleaning and tearing apart old coolers, freezers and shelving.

"Having my dad and Glenn Arnold in the store as mentors was a great blessing. Between the two of them, I had 60 years of experience at my fingertips."

In 1991 the store went 24 hours, which it continues to be to this day. In 1994, Craig began to buy stock in the business and moved to a co-manager position until his father's retirement in 2002.

### Longtime Employees

In the ensuing years, Craig has stepped up his focus on community and customer service. The store employs approximately 80 people, many of whom have been longtime associates. "Jerry King will be here 30 years this year," Craig said. "He works nights — and that's a big reason why I still feel

comfortable being open 24 hours. Jerry doesn't miss a pin drop."

Craig also credits his longtime assistant manager and office manager as being essential to the success of the business. "Between their people skills and heart for the business," he said, "I can take vacations and days off without worrying."

In his spare time, Craig enjoys taking part in outdoor activities with his three sons, including bow-hunting.

### Community Focus

Throughout the year, Paxton IGA conducts numerous community events, including weekend cookouts that take place all but three months of the year. "On average, we make about 270 sandwiches in a weekend at the cookouts — alternating between ribeye and pork chop sandwiches," Craig said.

Thirty-five percent of the proceeds from the cookouts go to local charities, with over \$12,000 raised last year.

The store has also instituted another fundraising tool for non-profits. "If the members of a church, for instance, spend \$200,000 here, the organization gets a check for \$1,000," Craig said. "The shoppers just keep their receipts and submit them to us bundled in one-thousand-dollar increments. Our first group, St. Mary's Catholic Church, just turned in their receipts and received a check. We're excited about the public relations benefits too because it's going to be featured in the local paper."

Another draw for the community is the store's annual Kids Fest event, which features everything from petting zoos to magicians. "This year we did cold-blooded creatures," Craig said, "including an alligator, snakes and a tortoise. The alligator was named 'Bubba' and kids could sit on it and pet it."

To gauge customer satisfaction, the Paxton IGA utilizes IGA's customer feedback on the web. "That's been a tremendous help," Craig said. "We get all kinds of great comments from that."

When the Super Walmart store actually arrived in Rantoul in 2007, Craig and his team were ready. "We never did as badly as anyone predicted," he said. "That's a testament to our associates and our community." ■

