

Ziebart celebrates 55 years since Motor City founding

BY RACHELLE DAMICO

THE WORLDWIDE LEADER OF AUTOMOBILE protection and appearance services – an iconic company famous for inventing vehicle rustproofing – is celebrating 55 years in business.

Ziebart International Corporation and its famed slogan: “It’s us, or rust!” has evolved to offer more than 29 vehicle protection products and services.

Today the company also specializes in detailing, protective films and products to protect vehicles inside and out from the weather, road debris and, of course, rust. The company has expanded to over 400 locations in 32 countries and is in a growth mode for 2015.

Thomas Wolfe, a DAC member since 1982, is president and CEO of Ziebart and has worked for and led the company longer than its founder, Kurt Ziebart.

If rust doesn’t sleep, the same might be said about Wolfe, who at 70 continues his passion for all things that protect and preserve the look of cars.

“Ziebart is as relevant today as it was since the introduction of rustproofing services,” said Wolfe, who has served as the brand’s ambassador and promoter around the nation and world. “It’s our duty to preserve and grow this iconic brand locally and globally.”

Ziebart has innovated and expanded its services from rustproofing to services such as vehicle detailing, spray on bed liners, Z-Liner, and a host of proprietary products and services.

“We continue to grow and expand because we keep changing our products and services to serve customers,” said Wolfe. “If it was just rustproofing we wouldn’t be in business.”

Wolfe added that even though new cars of are better quality than ever, there is still a market for rustproofing and its Hawaii franchise is top seller of the new high-tech rustproofing formula Ziebart offers.

It all started when automotive mechanic Kurt Ziebart founded the company in 1959, six years after he had emigrated from Germany. He arrived in Detroit penniless eventually landing a job in Detroit as a mechanic. Later



Kurt Ziebart in an undated photograph.



he was employed by a collision shop owner who would eventually become a partner in his rustproofing venture.

Ziebart began his first attempts at rustproofing while working on a 1953 Packard. He experimented with different methods and sealants, perfecting the sealant in 1959.

Ziebart initially generated little success marketing the product to companies so he decided to go into business for himself, opening his first shop on Harper Avenue in Detroit.

In 1963, after much success with Ziebart’s rustproofing business, Roger Waindle, a corrosion study expert, bought the business that would eventually become Ziebart International Corporation.



Left, Ziebart President Tom Wolfe addresses dignitaries and employees during a 55-year celebration in July.

Two years later the first international franchise opened in Canada followed by a franchise in Japan.

Today, Ziebart operates from its headquarters in Troy and offers over 29 products including the most recent – Z-Shield Paint Protection Film, a clear plastic-like film that protects against stone chips, salt and road debris.

“It’s a great product to help protect your vehicle,” said Wolfe. “It will save consumers money in the long run, as it’s far less costly than paying for repair of paint chips or a new paint job.”

Wolfe has worked for Ziebart for over 35 of the company’s 55 years in business, joining in 1977. He became president and CEO in 1994. Prior to that, he was the company’s executive vice president and CFO. Wolfe successfully led the company through an employee stock ownership program the year he became president.

“I’m taking care of our employees and their families,” said Wolfe. “I felt that if the employees owned it they would work harder to make the company better and serve our customers with greater care.”

Wolfe is responsible for the long-term corporate strategy

and profit plan for Ziebart and its U.S. affiliate. Through his leadership, Ziebart entered into several key business partnerships with Rhino Linings and the acquisition of Speedy Auto Glass.

“Passion for cars and people has always kept me here,” said Wolfe. “I’ve had offers to sell, but the employees would lose their jobs. It’s the people that make the company, not the products, and we have a great team.”

Wolfe played a central role in keeping Ziebart afloat during the recent economic recession when the company began to lose franchises and profits were shrinking.

Dealers filed lawsuits and Ziebart’s bank backed away from financing as the company struggled with debt.

When the Oakland County Sheriff’s office appeared at Ziebart’s

headquarters to seize equipment and other valuable company assets Wolfe took a stand.

“I told them, I can file for bankruptcy right now or I can work with you,” said Wolfe. “So I signed a document and put forward my own money. We ended up playing cards for the rest of the night until the banks opened.”

After the deal was made, Wolfe was able to build financing, new franchises began to open, and the company began thriving once again.

“It was a very stressful time,” said Wolfe. “It was fortitude, determination and resiliency that kept me and the company going.”

Wolfe also credits the support he has had for 26 years from his wife Elizabeth.

A certified public accountant, Wolfe served as the President of the DAC in 2000. During his leadership the DAC reached a capacity Resident membership of 3,000 – the highest enrollment since 1968.

Wolfe also led the effort to expand the Club’s parking garage to multiple decks over the existing garage.

In 2014, DBusiness magazine ranked Ziebart among the top five automotive aftermarket franchises. Entrepreneur magazine also recognized Ziebart as a top global franchise company.

Most recently, Ziebart opened franchises in Washington and in Azerbaijan and Poland.

“The future is bright,” said Wolfe. “Our company continues to grow nationally and internationally “I think Kurt Ziebart would be very proud that the company that bears his name retains its rich history and heritage of rustproofing while pioneering numerous other products to preserve and protect cars.”



Tom Wolfe presenting the Saudi Arabian Ziebart franchise owner with a dealer-of-the-year award in 2009.