

Partners in Excellence



Irwin Lincoln Mazda—Going on 60 Years!

By Jon Otto



In the spring of 1960, Hal Irwin and his partner became the proud owners of the Lincoln Mercury dealership on Lafayette Street in downtown Freehold, New Jersey. In many ways this dealership was part of the end of the era in which dealerships were “in town” and had small showrooms; in this case it was a one car showroom. In that bygone era, when dealers didn’t carry hundreds of new cars in “inventory” it was more common to order your new car and wait, than it was to buy a car “off the lot”. It wasn’t long until the dealership moved into a larger space on the Freehold Circle where it is currently located.

In 1965, Hal made his next big step; he not only bought out his partner, but he bought the building they had been renting for the last 5 years. In the next years the dealership flourished and Irwin Lincoln Mercury became an established and respected dealership.

Hal and his wife Barbara have three children; Kerry who worked alongside his

father until retiring in 2002, Jay who pursued a career in California, and Shelly LoCascio. It was Shelly who, although a Secondary Education and Health & Physical Education major, showed the most interest in the business. In 1975, as a single mom, she needed a job. She started as a secretary and spent time as bookkeeper, office manager and controller. With her children often joining her at work in the afternoons, she took on more and more responsibility and learned all aspects of the business and ultimately became general manager which was the position she held when we met.



In 2001, Shelly and her father started to plan for some much needed expansion. In Shelly’s words, “they needed to find a builder they could trust”. As part of her builder search, Shelly reached out to Dennis Zawalich who was president of Burlington Lincoln Mercury and also president of the New Jersey Lincoln Mercury Dealers Association. Dennis was a two time Penn Valley customer and very generously gave us a very positive recommendation.



So it was in the fall of 2001 that John DenBleyker and I made the short drive out to Freehold to meet with Hal and Shelly.

At that meeting it became clear to us that with Hal reaching his mid-seventies, Shelly would “carry the ball” on the first project. While the dealership was and is wonderfully located, the lot is only a little over two acres which was not enough to handle the growth the dealership had already experienced and the additional growth that was planned as part of the “Lincoln luxury car experience”. Hal and Shelly knew they were going to have to go off site. Fortunately, Irwin Holdings was able to purchase another two acre site only a little over 300 feet north of the dealership on US Route 9. The plan was to build a service and parts center at this location and allow the existing dealership to be focused its new and used car sales operations.

In the spring of 2002, we started as we normally do, by working with the Shelley to develop a “program” of what she wanted to accomplish on this



site and in the new building. We had a pretty good plan put together and turned it over to Shelly’s civil engineer who began to work out the engineering details of the site. Things were moving along pretty nicely ... we thought. We were aware from the get go that we had to honor the NJDEP’s buffer requirements and keep a certain distance from a small seasonal stream on an adjoining property. This buffer had slightly reduced the buildable area of the new Irwin site, but we had to work around it. Then came the “bombshell”; in 2003 the NJDEP upgraded the classification of the stream to class C1 because downstream it ran through a state park. This is the designation given to “trout quality waters”. With this new designation came increased buffers which completely strangled the site and made it virtually worthless for anything more than a parking lot. This for a watercourse that is little more than a drainage ditch and a very doubtful habitat for trout which require cool, clean, well oxygenated water. The project seemed to have been dealt a fatal blow.

By good fortune, John DenBleyker had met an attorney who knew how to deal with the NJDEP. Someone could easily write a book about the process we went through and the ultimate success that we achieved. Importantly, we did succeed and after nearly seven years of fighting not





only with the NJDEP but with the township which wanted the new Irwin building on Route 9 to have a colonial façade. In March of 2009, we were able to start construction on the new service and quick lane.

As is often the case, the construction itself was the “easy part”, by November eight years after we had met Hal and Shelly, they were able to move into the new 16,000 square foot building.



While the Service and Quick Lane approvals were moving at a snail's pace, Shelly was still pressing for growth. In 2003 Shelly purchased Richards Mazda in Freehold and brought it under their roof at the original dealership. In 2004, when Shelly officially became the “Dealer” for Irwin Lincoln Mercury, she had no time to rest. She needed more space for inventory and with the addition of Mazda, more functions had to be pulled out of the original building.

In 2003, Shelly had found suitable piece of land in nearby Howell Township and once again, together, we started the design and approval process for the large vehicle storage lot and detail center. On this site Irwin would receive new

cars on trailers and get them prepped for the showroom and delivery. In June of 2006, this project was able to start and by late October, we had delivered the six acre paved storage yard which accommodates 600 vehicles and the new detail building.

Even before we had finished the Service and Quick Lane, Mazda introduced a new dealer image and Shelly agreed to participate. Thus, the vacated service area in the original building was to become the New Mazda Showroom. 2009 was spent in planning and design in coordination with Mazda and in February of 2010 we were able to start the interior and exterior renovation.



With few worries about the weather, this job moved very quickly with a new glass and ACM façade facing Route 9 and a new showroom with porcelain tile floors and Mazda signature features. By early June of 2010, this project was complete and Shelly took a “breather”.

However, it was not a very long “breather”; Lincoln, having retired the Mercury brand, decided to emphasize and enhance the “luxury car experience”. This meant a lot of things to Lincoln dealers; picking up cars for service and delivering cars to customers for test drives.



It also meant a new "Image" inside and out. In the late summer of 2013, Shelly asked John DenBleyker to come for a visit and start budgets for the upgrade. John brought Steve Pfau, our project manager for the Mazda job, into the project and together with Shelly and John Mannino of Cerminara Architects, we started the process with Lincoln's designer.



The back and forth between Shelly's team and Lincoln took over two years, which is not uncommon, and in January of 2016 we were able to start construction. As with the Mazda project, we were once again working entirely within the existing footprint of the original building. So as is often the case, this job was broken into two phases so Shelly could keep operating while we were working. The first, smaller phase included interior changes to the office and Lincoln's signature Black Label Studio. The second much larger phase included a complete exterior facelift; new landscaping and paving, a complete new ACM and EIFS facade with Lincoln ICON tower and new storefront glass. The interior received new ceilings, ceramic floors and refurbished bathrooms together with new electric fixtures and an upgraded HVAC; All in all, a pretty spectacular metamorphosis.

Irwin Lincoln Mazda remains a family affair; Shelly's son Travis LoCascio is the General Manager and his wife Melissa is the Fixed Operations Manager. Daughter-in-law Rose LoCascio is the Controller and nephew Jay Irwin is Sales Manager.



This past summer the fourth generation was represented by Shelly's grandson, John LoCascio, who started work by keeping the lot clean. Happily, Hal and Barbara are in good health and are able to enjoy watching their family succeed in the business Hal started almost 60 years ago!

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