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15 Minutes With . . . Don Temple – Businessman, Philanthropist



In 1968, Don Temple opened the first self-storage business in Los Angeles County. At one time he had 5,500 tenants at five self-storage facilities. (Long Beach Business Journal photograph by Carlos Delgado)

Don Temple is a self-storage pioneer, a pilot who has flown around the globe and a philanthropist who helped keep a Long Beach hospital open. Temple has maintained an entrepreneurial spirit from a young age while keeping to his values and giving back to the communities that have supported him.

Born in Morris, Kansas, and raised in Olathe, Kansas, Temple operated his first business at age 14. He and his father signed for a \$1,500 loan to purchase an ice truck, ice storage facility and equipment. After his first summer delivering ice blocks to locals, he paid off the loan and had \$1,200 in the bank. On the side, he was buying \$10 oak iceboxes to clean up, re-varnish and sell for \$20. “I’ve always . . . I guess nobody really ever taught me that lesson, but I’ve always tried to have money in reserve,” he said. “Opportunities come along, and you’ve got to be in a position to do something.”

Temple graduated from Olathe High School and joined the U.S. Merchant Marines in 1945 at age 17. He made his way to California for boot camp on Catalina Island, and upon arrival felt like he had landed in another world. Temple served with the U.S.

Merchant Marines during World War II and in the Navy during the Korean conflict. Temple later opened his first Long Beach business – a service station, garage and towing operation – before pioneering the first self-storage business in the Los Angeles basin.

Never a man to forget his roots, Temple has been placed on the Wall of Excellence at the Olathe Board of Education Office and is honored at the Olathe Mahaffie Historical Museum for his donations. Because of his successful business career, Temple and his wife of 13 years, Marlene, are able to participate in many Long Beach philanthropic and cultural organizations, including Community Hospital of Long Beach. In 2004 the couple was recognized by the Steel Magnolias, by ChildNet in 2005 and by Long Beach City College in 2010.

Earlier this month, they were among the California Conference for Equality and Justice honorees at the 48th annual Humanitarian Awards banquet. The couple sat down with Business Journal Staff Writer Tiffany Rider to discuss their philanthropic endeavors, as well as Don Temple’s entrepreneurial experiences and how piloting a plane around the globe changed his life.



Don Temple, a Long Beach Rotarian and active member of the Long Beach Executives Club, continues to give back to the community with his wife of 13 years, Marlene Temple. Among her many involvements, Marlene is a member of The Steel Magnolias and a supporter of the Long Beach Dramatic Allied Arts Guild and Musical Theatre West's Footlighters. (Long Beach Business Journal photograph by Carlos Delgado)

LBBJ: What brought you to Long Beach?

Don Temple: I joined the Merchant Marines in 1945. They said they were going to send me to Catalina Island. I said, 'Where's that?' I'd never seen the ocean before. So I got out here on Catalina Island. That was boot camp. . . . I wrote back home and said, 'I didn't go to war; I done died and went to Heaven. I won't be back.'

You can imagine, coming from a small town in Kansas, that I was impressed with Catalina Island. I was in the Merchant Marines for three years and then lived in Santa Monica for a couple years. Then I spent two years in the Korean War. After that I came to Long Beach. I opened up a service station in Anaheim the same day that Disneyland opened in 1955. I wasn't there too long.

LBBJ: What was your first business in Long Beach?

Don Temple: I leased the service station, garage and towing business at Palo Verde and Spring Street in 1958, purchased the property in 1965 from the Irvine Land Company, and leased out this business in 1968. This property was converted to a strip mall in 2006.

LBBJ: How did you get involved in the aviation industry?

Don Temple: I wasn't actually involved in the industry, but became interested in private flying from my dad and two uncles from an early age. I had my first airplane ride when I was six months old. I was born in 1927, and that year my dad and two uncles started flying. So I've been around aviation basically my whole life. I started flying and got my license off Long Beach Airport in 1961, my commercial license in 1962, followed by licensing for Float Plane, Instrument and Glider. I'd been around flying off the airport for 45 years before I sold my last airplane. I've owned 32 airplanes.

LBBJ: You flew around the world in a Cessna 421/C. Tell us about that experience, and how it felt to have a book written about it.

Don Temple: It was in 1992. There was an ad in an aviation magazine from a guy in Italy who was looking for anybody who wanted to fly around the world as a group of airplanes. He received 500 inquiries, and when it came time to go, there were 12. So we left from Santa Monica on July 1, 1992, and we got back 20 days later. We went eastward toward Oklahoma City . . . and made several landings including five stops through Russia over Siberia.

In Russia, they had a welcoming committee there at Moscow Airport where they had us land on an unimproved field. No runway, just dirt. The first guy I met there was retired Cosmonaut Igor Volk. He was interested in the airplanes from here because he really hadn't seen airplanes outside of Russia. There was a young lady there who was an interpreter for him. She was 16 years old at that time and spoke perfect English. I brought her over here and put her through college. She went on and got here master's degree and she's a citizen here. . . .

On that trip, Volk was able to get us into Star City, which is similar to our Kennedy Space Center, walled community with 5,000 people living within, 50 miles north of Moscow. The commander of the base was our tour guide. We were on an upper level, treated like VIPs. It was interesting because they've got a nice museum there. . . . What really made it interesting was that Igor Volk's stuff was in the museum and he was with us. That kind of adds to it.

So we're taking this tour and we go into this one place and they had some sort of training going on there. And the guy says, 'Do you want to get into a spacesuit?' So I got a picture of myself in a

Russian spacesuit. . . . As I tell everybody, it wasn't a trip. It was an experience as it turned out.

I had no actual input in the writing of the book – it was written and published by Brad Butler, who was along on the trip for that purpose. Many of us met at the Santa Monica Air Museum in 1998 for a book signing to launch its distribution.

LBBJ: What business endeavors were you a part of at the Long Beach Airport?

Don Temple: I owned a hanger at Eagle Aviation on the airport property, where I kept my plane.

LBBJ: If you could change anything about the airport operation, what would it be?

Don Temple: I sold my plane and hanger in 2005, and termed out of the Airport Commission in 2010. Therefore, I am not up-to-date on the airport, and don't wish to comment on its operation.

LBBJ: How did you come to own The Grand property on Willow Street?

Don Temple: I was a member of Elks Lodge 888 when the lodge went into foreclosure. I purchased the property and donated \$250,000 to the Elks to allow them to solve their financial problems. When they failed to do so and vacated the property, I offered a partnership to Jim Choura to handle the food and general day-to-day operations of the building. Since then, I relinquished my percentage of the food and building operations to Jim and [his son] Ryan Choura, and they now lease the building from me as their landlord.

LBBJ: What led you to get into the storage business?

Don Temple: I had owned and operated several service stations, garage and a towing company in the area, and wanted to find some other field. I heard of a business in Mesa, Arizona, which had built 50 garages and were renting them out to the "snowbirds." I determined that there was going to be a need for storage, along with recreational vehicle storage. I opened the first self-storage facility in Los Angeles County in 1968 at 3750 E. Spring St. before anyone knew what self-storage was. I've been fortunate enough that they put me in the hall of fame for the self-storage industry in the whole United States. They proved that I was one of the first 50 in the United States.

It was making lots of mistakes and adjustments because you didn't have anything else to go to and watch somebody else. We got that going and it was highly successful. I've been involved with various [self-storage] ownerships, nine of them, and I've got three left now: the original site; one at Redondo Avenue and Spring Street beside Kilroy; and I've got one up in Lakewood. We've been very fortunate to be one of the first ones, so-called pioneers into it. Today there are 55,000 of them in the United States. It's a \$94 billion industry. Most people don't realize it. When I had five of them operating at one time, I had 5,500 tenants. I have only 1,400 today.

LBBJ: We know that you are both very active in giving back to the community. What have been some of your philanthropic endeavors in Long Beach?

Don Temple: I was involved in Community Hospital, probably 10 to 15 years ahead of [funding the cancer center]. Somebody came to me and they were remodeling some rooms at \$10,000 a room. So I told my wife, my first wife who has passed way after we were married for 43 years. I went home to her and told her, 'I think we ought to give something back to the community. They've been pretty good to us.' So I've always tried to stay with that; to give back to the community because they've been good to us. I put up the money to remodel two of those rooms and then I was on the foundation there for a few years.

I was there when the hospital closed, and I was involved in both

time and financially in reopening the hospital. I was on the board of directors since we reopened it. I always believed in it. My wife died of cancer at Long Beach Community in 1991 and that's when I put up some money to build the cancer center that's there today – the Temple Family Cancer Center. I was also involved with the recent merger of the hospital with MemorialCare Health System. That's been kind of my main focus on the charity end of it. And then I married my current wife, Marlene. . . . She's become more of the charity leader than I have.

I have been a Rotarian for over 25 years, and am a Paul Harris Fellow, along with my wife and granddaughter. I enjoy their programs, mixing with the businesspeople of Long Beach, and supporting their various community projects.

[Several years ago] Jim Worsham and Jean Bixby-Smith came to me when they were forming the Long Beach Community Foundation, and I felt it was a good avenue from which to make personal donations. Also, as Long Beach City College Foundation donors, both of us are interested in assisting young adults in furthering their education, and we feel that Long Beach City College is such an asset to our community. We are pleased to be a part of the College Promise program, which gives any student the opportunity to enter college, with the hope that this will be a first step toward further education and a rewarding career.

Marlene Temple: Don has always been interested in this because he didn't graduate from college. Neither did I. So he's always been interested in trying to get kids involved in the mechanics, like aviation mechanics, and things that pay very well and make a wonderful career for someone who isn't educationally adjusted.

Don Temple: Everybody can't be presidents and CEOs and lawyers and doctors.

Marlene Temple: We are active with local philanthropies, many focusing on children. I was president of Dramatic Allied Arts Guild, and that's a group that gives scholarships to Long Beach City College and California State University, Long Beach, in the field of art, be it dance or be it movie art or artistic drawings – any kind of art at the art department at either one of those schools. We are supporters and season-ticket holders to the Long Beach Symphony POPS and Musical Theatre West, where I served as president of the Footlighter support group. They give scholarships to students studying musical theater. We donate to a lot of things like the Historical Society, but we're not active.

Probably one of the things I'm most proud of is that I'm a Steel Magnolia. We keep our membership at 50, but everyone in the group is a doer. All we donate to is the Stramski Children's Development Center at Miller Children's Hospital for children who have cleft palates, for children who have attention deficit disorder – lifelong kinds of problems. We deal with not only the child as a patient, but with the family because if you have a child that has any kind of problem, it's a family problem. So they have psychiatrists and everything at the center. I'm really proud to be a Steel Magnolia. ■