

Family-Owned GES Has a Hit with Edwards Cash Saver

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Grandsons J.P. Rowton, left, and William Rowton, right, flank their great-grandfather Oral Edwards; back, from left, Paul Rowton, company VP, with his father-in-law, company president Steve Edwards.

When the ownership of longtime community grocer Knight's Super Foods in Beebe, Arkansas, changed hands from one family to another early this year, there likely was some apprehension in the community. The Knight family had been very active in Beebe. People knew and trusted them.

Paul Rowton was sensitive to those feelings. He is VP of GES Inc., the parent company of Edwards Food Giant and Edwards Cash Saver. GES closed the former Knight's Super Foods for 30 days to remodel. That is a long time and a big deal for a small community.

"They were worried that they'd lost their independent, family-owned grocery store. We were pushing to try to get it open as soon as we could," Rowton told *The Shelby*

Report. "With all the remodeling we did, it was a pretty big feat for our operations team to get us back in there in 30 days."

It is the company's fourth Edwards Cash Saver. The cost-plus-10 outlet has been well received by the Beebe community since it opened in February.

"When we opened back up there were a lot of people coming in. There were a few people who were skeptical," he said. "They had been with the Knight family for 40 years and weren't sure what we were doing, because that was a new market for us."

GES brightened up the store with new lighting, paint and cases.

"The comments we got and the feedback we got from customers was tremendous," Rowton said. "It was well received by the community."

Edwards Cash Saver is a relatively new concept for GES, which opened the first one about four years ago. All four Cash Savers are in and around Little Rock. The cost-plus-10 model shows the cost of the goods at the shelf and then 10 percent is added to the total at



The produce department at an Edwards Food Giant in Little Rock.

checkout. But the Edwards version of a cost-plus-10 features fresh produce and meat, including certified Angus beef, just like the company has in its seven traditional Edwards Food Giant stores.

“We’re carrying a full assortment of all items, especially in perishables, and I think that along with the cost and the shelf pricing has been a big hit in that market,” Rowton said.

There aren’t service cases in the Cash Savers, although meat department employees are ready to serve customers. GES prides itself on being known as “The Meat People.”

“Customers are requesting special cuts of meat all throughout the day,” Rowton said. “That’s been a strength for us since Walmart got out of the meat cutting business. We’ve put a big emphasis on it and tried to differentiate ourselves. It’s been a tremendous help.

“At the Cash Savers, we cut inch-and-a-half T-bones and just about anything else the customers want,” he added. “I think our customers have come to know that they can get anything they want just by catching the butcher or a meat department employee and saying, ‘hey, can we get this today?’”

The Beebe store is one of three locations GES purchased from the Knight family. Another is located in Jacksonville and opened as a Cash Saver in 2016. This third in Cabot is closed for now.

“We’re just not sure which banner to operate under. We’re not sure if we want to open an Edwards Food Giant or an Edwards Cash Saver,” Rowton said. “We’ve had several sets of projections run and are actually in the process of running another one to try to get more in-depth information about what type of banner would be most successful there.”



One of the major draws of Edwards Cash Saver stores is an emphasis on fresh meat. This photo is from the Beebe store that opened in February.

Little Rock expansion

GES moved into Little Rock in 2009, when it bought two stores and “started from scratch,” Rowton said.

“We’d been in East Arkansas for 50-something years but had never been in the Little Rock market,” he said. “We were really able to get some good store managers, some good department managers, and that’s made all the difference, the people that we have there.”

Edwards Food Giant stores feature service meat and seafood cases and larger deli, bakery, produce and meat departments.



One of the Little Rock stores is located at 7507 Cantrell Road in an area referred to as The Heights.

“That was our first true remodel when we went into Little Rock, so we took some extra time,” Rowton said. “We expanded the deli/bakery over what we normally offer and the same with the produce and the seafood and full-service meat counter.”

It is a full-service experience. Groceries are carried to -shopper's cars.

Meeting community needs

In addition to Little Rock, GES operates Edwards Food Giant stores in Harrisburg, Forrest City and Marianna. In Harrisburg, with a population of about 2,400, the Edwards Food Giant is sometimes referred to as a "community center." A sit-down restaurant is one amenity that helps this location stand out.

"When this store opened, there weren't a lot of dining options in town," Rowton said. "The Harrisburg store also has a sporting goods store inside that carries firearms, hunting supplies and fishing equipment, and then we also have a -hardware store within a store. It's a one-stop shop."

Founder Oral Edwards has always placed a high priority on improving the communities where the company operates stores.

"Not only do we employ people from this community, but we're part of the community," Rowton said. "As the community grows and prospers, so will we, hopefully. It's another one of our founding principles—to take care of those that are less fortunate and also to make sure that our community does well. We put in the sweat equity to see our communities grow.

"Our management team lives in different parts of the state, and that is because we think we need to be plugged into different areas and the different communities that we operate in," he added.

Taking care of employees

A couple of GES employees have been with the company for 40 years; several more have hit the 35-year mark. Rowton said that as a family-owned employer, GES has always done its best to take care of employees because they take care of customers.

Employees seem as enamored of Edwards Food Giant as customers are.

"We've only been in the Little Rock market for eight years now, but out of those first two stores, we've probably got 45 people who've been with us since they opened, which is kind of unique in an urban area like that," Rowton said. "We've got a very good team, and we do everything we can to take care of them. A big part of that is hiring the right people and having them in the right position so that they can excel, but also so they can love coming to work and taking care of our customers."

Respecting the competition

Every grocer in Arkansas is likely asked about the giant retailer in the Northwest corner of the state. Rowton wouldn't say GES has "beat" Walmart at the grocery game.

"Much like Kroger, they're very good competitors and they've forced us to keep our eye on the ball and to continually improve and work extra hard to take care of customers," Rowton said. "Our market is probably a little bit more competitive than some other places in the country, but it's allowed us to really put our best foot forward."

He said some of the Edwards Food Giant stores share a parking lot or are across the street from a Walmart location.

“The competition is there and it’s stiff, and if you neglect certain areas or if you don’t treat customers right, they’ve certainly got options,” he said.

As for the big acquisition Amazon recently announced (and many already are tired of hearing about), Rowton says it’s an ever-changing industry, but it always has been. Even Amazon’s acquisition of Whole Foods Market will create opportunities.

“I think the family-owned grocery store is going to have opportunities to excel because there is a large segment of our population that still values the service,” he said. “They want to talk to their butcher. If they’re buying produce, they want to be able to visit with the produce manager. It could also create some areas for us to become even more of a niche player.”

He recently had a conversation with his father-in-law, Steve Edwards, who also is the president of GES, about how quickly the grocery industry is evolving.

“If you look over the history of our industry, it has always been changing,” Rowton said. “But if we do the things we’ve always done, that’s not going to be good enough. We’ve got to do the things that the customers want.”

Toward that end, GES is revamping its website and soon will offer online shopping and curbside pickup.

“It’s a challenge, but it’s giving us an opportunity to stay fresh and to keep changing and to try to evolve as the customer evolves,” Rowton said. “We very much live in the business, and being a family company, we sit around the dinner table and talk about things like that.”