DWR features in L&SI

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The DWR Distribution team (Absent: Nick Britz & Judd Harrison) A special word of thanks extends

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to Louise Stickland for the article (as below) which appeared in "Lighting & Sound International magazine, Aug-Sept 2010". Thank you also to L&SI. Visit: https://www.lsionline.co.uk. Download the PDF (as top of the page) for the feature as it appeared in their magazine.

We're continually reminded that people and relationships make this industry, and nowhere is that more apparent than in South Africa, a country with a unique vibrance, energy and …. endless possibilities.

Paying lip service to that is one thing, actually delivering seriously good quality, informed and efficient service is something else.

In 2006 Duncan Riley gave up the security and banality of full time employment (in the industry) to set up DWR Distribution, with the ambition to become the best, most proactive and service driven professional lighting sales company in South Africa.

With a young family to support, it was a bold decision and a huge challenge. He started with absolutely nothing in terms of capital investment, but with an amazing foresight and a reputation as one who cared passionately about the business and about being good. More than this, most people – and certainly those who matter – genuinely like Riley! He was a man with a plan and some incredible friends.

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Duncan, Dan and Bruce Riley When DWR was launched, key elements of the South African production industry united behind Riley, reinforcing his decision and in many cases offering extraordinary support. This, together with his wife Sherryn who has been his “rock” throughout, propelled him through that first year, when to say “the going was tough” was an understatement!

It was also all character building stuff that Riley has not regretted for a nanosecond!

Four years later, DWR is on the map as a hugely respected and very well liked operation standing well above rest for offering superlative technical and product support, informative and relevant training and standards of excellence and a commitment that inspires.

The company has succeeded in introducing several major premium brands to the SA market – notably Robe, MA Lighting, Vari*Lite, Avolites, ADB, LSC and CM motors which are bought via LTM in the UK, Strong, Le Maitre, Prolyte and LumenRadio.

With A Little Help from His Friends

The company started with Riley and Nic Britz working out of his garage in Weltevredenpark, Johannesburg. Britz was a lighting operator, programmer and designer on small to medium events at the time. Right from the off, Riley wanted to build a team based on solid personalities

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with the right experience and attitude, so having a technical department led by someone experienced on working shows and events – and understanding first hand the stresses and demands involved – was vital to planting the roots of the company philosophy.

Judd Harrison & Nick Britz Mike Jones of MJ Event Gear – a bit of a local maverick – was the one who initially encouraged Riley to make the phone call to Harry von den Stemmen from Czech Republic based moving light manufacturer Robe lighting. Robe was a young, go-ahead company with a real penchant for innovation and a similar enthusiasm for the industry and hunger to succeed as DWR. The brand was rapidly gaining momentum and being appreciated for its quality and engineering, so it was a perfect match. Riley laughs when he thinks back to that call – von den Stemmen was busy at an exhibition and actually thought Riley was joking when he said he wanted to distribute Robe in SA!

Riley borrowed 50,000 Rand from his mother and caught a plane to the Czech Republic to meet Robe's MD Josef Valchar and seal the deal. On his way back, he went via London and visited Avolites to sort an agreement with them, after an introduction from the colourful 'Crazy Israeli' Ofer Lapid, MD of Gearhouse South Africa, the country's largest rental company. He met with Avo's Steve Warren and Koy Neminathan .,... and walked away as their SA representative.

He returned from that trip and set up DWR.

The production industry is small in South Africa, and Riley's friends were prepared to help. There's too many of them to namecheck in this article, but key individuals boosting Riley's

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confidence and belief in himself and DWR in those early stages include Otto Horlacher from Giant Lights, who helped import goods before DWR received its own import licence.

The first big moving light order came soon – for 36 Robe ColorSpot and ColorWash 1200E ATs to Movievision in Johannesburg.

This shipment would not fit into the garage, so typically, he called a friend! They stored all the kit at Mike Jones' offices and MJ also helped them deliver the kit to the TV studios.

Five months later, DWR moved out of the garage and into its current purpose built unit in Graphite Industrial Park, Randburg, Johannesburg.

Bruce Riley (his brother) joined Britz on the technical support side a year later, underlining DWR's strong commitment to shit-hot, knowledgeable before-and-after sales service. "Products are important, but more so is having the relationship with your client and being there whenever they need you" he affirms.

Shortly afterwards Sherryn Riley started, initially managing the office and also co-ordinating an extremely active marketing and PR campaign. This has pushed DWR's name out there both nationally and internationally, with regular press articles, E newsletters and a hugely informative, lively fun-packed website that is constantly updated.

"Communication on all levels underpins the company" states Riley

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Cherine Viney, Nicolet Britz and Sherryn Riley DWR now has 15 full time employees. The nepotism is a bit of a joke! Riley's father Dan, a theatre lighting sales specialist of 40 years standing, also joined the company a couple of years ago, but family feuds are nonexistent. Riley has carefully hand picked and built his team for their skills and personalities, which includes key sales manager Rob Izzett who came onboard in 2008 and Office Manager Cherine Viney who joined in 2007.

"All my staff give it 200% all the time" Riley says proudly. He knows from experience just how vital a good working atmosphere is to the smooth running of the operation and in creating an environment where people understand that long hours and weekends can be necessary, and how everyone benefits from a happy, constructive, positive workplace, where individuals can be themselves and be comfortable.

The approach to take on MA Lighting initially came through the ubiquitous Ofer Lapid, who was very keen to act as match-maker again, together with others in Gearhouse like director Tim Dunn. Riley looked at what MA were doing in terms of future technology, and it was a bit of a no-brainer, particularly as he knew he could sell their products into completely different areas to those using Avolites.

After settling in to the Graphite Industrial Park premises, the official DWR launch party "New Beginnings With Old Friends" in 2007 attracted over 200 guests from all over the country and

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internationally – resembling the Who's Who of the SA production industry! If this didn't endorse Riley's popularity as a person and DWR's respect as a sales company … then it's hard to imagine what else would.

Simon Ndlovu & Philemon Maepa

Highlights in the company's short history have come fast and furious.

The first large Robe sale to Gearhouse South Africa at the end of 2007 was major. Gearhouse had never used or bought Robe before, and apart from some exhaustive testing, they took Riley's word that the brand was reliable and good whilst committing to the purchase of nearly 100 units, most of which went directly onto the landmark 46664 Concert in Johannesburg.

After this, the ball really got rolling for Robe, and DWR has single handedly been responsible for establishing the brand as the fastest selling moving light in South Africa.

Another great confidence boost right at the outset was when Debbie Batzofin of Richard Loring Enterprises promised Riley a year in advance that he would be the supplier of choice for specialist moving lighting technology and control for the brand new Lyric Theatre at Gold Reef City. This sale and installation materialised in 2007.

Taking on the Vari*Lite distributorship in 2009 was a major step forward in terms of maturity, and DWR has just made the first significant sale of Vari-Lites into South Africa with Gearhouse taking 120 units, and 8 VLX's being installed by AV Unlimited into the new Supersports HD TV studio at M-NET.

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Underlining all this has been an ongoing emphasis on training, and ensuring that DWR's technical team stays abreast of the latest products, and also disseminating that knowledge to clients and end users of all their brands. Recently, the first ever Vari*Lite technical workshop was staged in South Africa, and regular training events are high on the agenda, both at the company's premises and on various sites.

DWR's turnover has doubled year on year even throughout 2009, when despite the unpredictable trading conditions, they hit all targets.

At the end of 2009, with the 2010 Soccer World Cup on the horizon, Riley thought smart!

Robert Izzett & Eazy Moeketsi

Knowing the propensity for decisions to be made close to the wire, he took the gamble of investing half a million Euros in equipment on spec, and sea freighted moving lights, control, trussing, etc., from Europe.

Every last piece was sold. Two weeks before the kick off, DWR had to air freight in another 4 tonnes of lighting and control gear to meet demand, as rental companies were kitting out fan parks, public viewing areas and a myriad of other World Cup associated events.

With one of the most successful World Cups in the history of the tournament under its belt, South

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Africa is undisputedly on the map for hosting more major world class sporting events to add to its already excellent reputation for staging some of the best and most imaginatively designed large live events

For the immediate future, DWR intends to continue the winning formula and strive to keep doing it better, improving the relationships, service and support, whilst – on this point Riley to totally adamant – “Having fun and enjoying what we do”

It that ever changes he insists, then it’s time to change careers!

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