

Ralph Howard  
Acceptance Speech  
Maglin/Biggie Associate Lifetime Achievement Award  
TRSA Convention, Phoenix Arizona  
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Introduction was written by Joe Ricci, TRSA Director, and presented by TRSA Chairman, Doug Wildman.

*The TRSA Maglin/Biggie Associate Lifetime Achievement Award is named for Rudy Maglin and James Biggie, two pioneers who dedicated their lives to improving textile services performance and leadership within our industry. The Maglin/Biggie Award is the highest honor bestowed upon an Associate recognizing exceptional personal service to both the textile services industry and TRSA as nominated by their Associate peers and selected by the TRSA Associate Committee. Past honorees here this evening include Mark Brim and Jeff Frushtick.*

*The recipient of this year's Maglin/Biggie Award has been an active member of the textile services industry for nearly 45 years working with independent, regional and national operators and supporting the professionalism of the industry through advocacy and education.*

*Upon entering the textile services market, his company became actively involved in the textile services industry through its associations – LSAA (now TRSA) and ILL (formerly UTSA). He has been an industry innovator fostering the development of the rubber-backed mats and other modifications that increased the durability and value of mats while expanding their market internationally.*

*As an enthusiastic, long-time member and supporter of the industry's Government Committees from 1980 until 2008, he helped articulate the industry's message to*

*federal, state and local regulatory agencies and elected officials. He has been quoted stating, "The benefits our industry brings to society are now better appreciated and understood by those charged with regulating it because of our association's advocacy efforts."*

*The industry has benefited from this gentlemen's corporate and personal contributions and his truly unique, colorful flair and character. Please join me in recognizing . . . Ralph Howard of Kleen-Tex. Congratulations Ralph and thank you!*

## **Ralph's acceptance speech**

Good Evening:

I appreciate the Associate Executive Committee for selecting me to receive TRSA's Maglin/Biggie Lifetime Achievement Award. It came as a surprise - a very pleasant surprise. I am honored to be the 11th. person to receive this prestigious award.

I asked advise about preparing an acceptance speech and was told to mention my personal background, what led me to work in this industry, highlights of Kleen-Tex's 49-year history and to discuss my work on behalf of the association.

Joe Ricci said I should limit the speech to ten minutes. That's a lot to cover so I wrote my speech and will stick closely to it. OK, Joe, start the timer .....

I was born in 1942 in LaGrange, GA. Between the ages of 9 and 14 I ran my first business - a paper route. It was a great experience! Working with rough and tumble older boys gave me independence - along with a vocabulary and an attitude that was not always "age appropriate." In High School my parents sent me to Marion Military Institute to "keep me out of trouble." Now, but not then, I appreciate their foresight.

LaGrange was a textile town dominated by Callaway Mills. Callaway's KEX division made and sold shop towels to a franchise network of rental laundries. Telephone exchanges piled shop towels on switch room floors to keep dust off sensitive equipment. This led Callaway to develop cotton floor mats - but slipping was a problem. They applied a latex backing - but it only lasted a few wash cycles. In the late 1950's Pete Gordon who worked in Callaway's research department was assigned to improve the latex but his lab did not have needed test equipment. My father owned a laundry and had washers, centrifugal extractors and dryers so Pete contracted with Dad to conduct tests on various prototypes. Later Callaway bought its own equipment and Dad lost the contract - but, he had seen the potential for launderable dust control mats.

In 1962, Dad, and my uncle Frank Lewis founded Mountville Mills to make latex backed cotton pile mats. Uncle Frank had a stroke, the partnership fell apart and Dad sold his interest in the business.

While this was going on I was attending Emory University and taking science courses that required many hours of lab work. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I was not a conscientious student - but I did eventually graduate.

One fine day in the Spring of 1964 I met Nita Brooks. Nita was from England. In my eyes she was, and still is, a very exotic bird. I was immediately in hot pursuit and we were married that winter.

I took a job at the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation and worked in the Materials Development Lab from 7 Am until 3 PM. At night I went to Georgia State University's night school and after 3 years earned an MBA. Because Nita was a British citizen I majored in International Business.

One night a professor lectured about different ways to start a business. I realized that was what I wanted to do. I called Dad and told him I planned to go into business for myself. He said "Great! What business?" I said "It doesn't matter." I was 25 years old and getting an MBA so any business would be OK. Youth is a wonderful thing.

Dad suggested the mat business and it sounded great. I found a "cook book" outlining steps for starting a manufacturing business. I followed the directions and put together a business plan that called for raising \$35,000 in equity. I was exactly \$35,000 short. No problem, it would be a shareholder owned company. Dad, 7 of his friends and my Mother agreed to invest. He co-signed a note for me and the ten of us each invested \$3500. With equity of \$35,000 and an SBA guarantee we borrowed an additional \$35,000. On September 7th. of 1967 Kleen-Tex Industries Inc. was officially registered to manufacture latex backed cotton pile mats

At that time vinyl backed mats with synthetic pile and a 1-inch border were gaining market share. They were attractive and easy to sell but they could not be washed and dried without rippling. Mat rental companies were losing accounts left and right

In 1968, Wally Andersen, our latex supplier, was trying to make a cotton pile mat with a rubber back and a border. There were technical problems and he asked if I was interested in helping with the development. Kleen-Tex was off to a slow start and losing money. I was definitely interested, very interested.

In January of 1970, after 18 months of trial and error, we introduced a bordered, cotton pile, rubber backed mat. We branded it the "Wash Horse." It proved to be a major innovation and set the stage for tremendous growth in the North American mat rental business.

In 1971 we invested in an English company - Walk Off Mats Ltd. During the next 4 years working with its Managing Director, Roy Brazier, we made two major improvements. To prevent the pile from separating from the rubber back we developed a new bonding machine. I named it the "Frogatron" as a tribute to my father

whose nickname was "Frog." (Nicknames are a Southern thing.) To prevent a reduction in tear strength when mats were exposed to oil we developed an oil resistant rubber.

Today, after 46 years, rubber backed mats dominate the worldwide rental mat market.

In 1974 we began working in Japan with a young man named Akira Fukuhara and in 1980 began manufacturing there. Kleen-Tex Japan was one of only 4 Georgia companies with facilities inside Japan.

At that time, making logo mats required long runs. In 1981 we introduced the Graphic Inlay Mat. This allowed rental laundries to buy in small quantities - usually two but often a single mat. Graphic Inlays looked great and became very popular in North America, Europe and Asia.

In 1985 we began perforating mats with thousands of tiny holes that allowed water to seep through the back during extraction. This significantly reduced drying costs. A Danish company used a similar process. They had worldwide patents claiming to have "Micro Valves" that would normally be closed and would open under extraction. In 1986 Kleen-Tex was sued for patent infringement. We saw winning the suit as a life or death situation. Lose and any mat that was not perforated would be technologically obsolete. Lose and only one company could make perforated mats for the laundry industry for the next 20 years.

We won the case in Atlanta's federal court. It was appealed to Washington DC. We won there in 1988. These two battles cost us over \$300,000 - a lot of money at the time. But that's not the end of the story. They sued us in England. We demonstrated that the patent actually covered surface tension - a natural phenomenon. We argued that if a company could patent surface tension they could also patent gravity. We finally overturned their patent in 1996. This litigation took countless hours of management time but over a three-year period we won the same case three times. English law requires the loser of a law suit to pay the legal costs of the winner. It's a great law. We recovered \$280,000 of our legal fees and the threat to sue us in Germany was dropped.

This was a huge victory for Kleen-Tex and for the entire rental mat industry. Today any mat manufacturer choosing to perforate a mat is free to do so.

There is more that could be said but that's enough about mats for tonight.

Sam Shapiro, my first TRSA Executive Director asked me to join the National Affairs committee. After Sam retired John Contney assumed leadership of TRSA, expanded the committee to include grass roots lobbying and established the TRSAPAC. I served on both the TRSA and IIL's Government Affairs committees for over 30 years. Fighting against bad regulations is a never ending battle but it was often a lot of fun. I met with Georgia's Senator Herman Talmadge - a genuine old school southern politician. As I was leaving his office Talmadge said, "Boy, before your visit I didn't know there was

a Textile Rental industry. You did the right thing coming see me. Here's the way it works, in Washington, DC 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease.'" Keep that in mind when you are asked to donate to TRSAPAC.

For many years I was actively involved with the World Textile Rental Congress. I helped organizing a meeting in Japan. That was the only WTRC meeting ever held in Asia. KTJ held a BBQ at our plant. I took a big group to the Kobe Sauna. It was the only visit to Japan for most of the participants and I am often reminded that it was a real eye opener.

As the American laundry industry matured buying groups were formed and there was widespread plant consolidations. Two major rental companies started making their own mats. With the reduction in both prices and the number of potential customers we reluctantly decided to sell our North American manufacturing assets and focus our attention on the Kleen-Tex operations in England, Austria, Poland, Thailand, South Africa, Japan and Brazil. We think about making mats in the US again but, for now, only import from our international operations. We are always open to discussing any business opportunities that arise.

Today I serve on the Kleen-Tex International Board of directors. I am also involved with Brainjogging, a cognitive enhancement program based on patented computer software. Brainjogging is used to overcome learning disabilities such as Dyslexia and ADHD. It can also be used to help overcome Autism and delay the development of Alzheimer's. I am enjoying this new endeavor.

The honor of standing before you today would not have occurred without the support of Nita, my loving, brilliant and brave wife of 52 years, She worked inside the business for 30 years. I was away from home weeks and even months at a time. She raised our son Bruce and daughter Jocelyn. They grew into fine adults and have great families of their own. Both work in our industry today.

I am a lucky man and have certainly been blessed. Nita, I salute you.

I want to thank all of you mat renting operating members. At Kleen-Tex we have a passion for making launderable mats but we have always depended on you to get them to the end users.

And, once again thanks to my fellow associate members. I have worked and struggled with you as a supplier to this tough industry for 49 years and plan to be on your side for many years to come.

You bestowed this great honor on me but it was earned by my family and the hundreds of passionate, mat making Kleen-Tex associates located around the world.

Thank you very much.