

THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 1993

SUBURBAN  
BUSINESS  
LEADERS

Wolfgang Dittmer has joined the Bloomfield Hills accounting and management consulting firm of Waler & Company P.C. as an organizational and facility consultant specializing in "right sizing," organizational and facility programming, asset management and ongoing facility management. Michael Palazolo has joined the firm as a project manager.



Wolfgang Dittmer

Robert D. Foster has formed Liberty Capital Management, an independent Investment Advisor, in Birmingham. Foster was formerly with Comerica Bank and Manufacturers Bank where he was responsible for the management of personal trust portfolios.



Robert D. Foster

Karen S. Shamaly has been promoted to vice president at Acquest Realty Advisors, Inc. of Bloomfield Hills. She is responsible for Acquest's property management division.



Karen Shamaly

Charles A. Fehl has been appointed vice president-private banking at Michigan National Bank in Farmington Hills. As part of the private banking team, Fehl will be responsible for providing full service banking to high net-worth individuals through the extension of credit and the marketing of bank and investment services.



Charles A. Fehl

To submit materials to this column, please send a brief biographical summary along with a black-and-white photo, if possible, to: Business Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150. There is no charge.

# Farr also runs hard in 2nd career

■ Owner of four car dealerships, Mel Farr believes he's just coming of age as a businessman.

By DOUG FUNKIE  
STAFF WRITER

Some people know him as Mel Farr Superstar, a fast-talking car salesman who "flies" with a magic cape in his TV advertisements. Others remember him as an all-pro running back with the Detroit Lions.

Farr, a Bloomfield Hills resident, actually is soft-spoken, owns an airplane, maintains a sporting interest in football and has his name on four automobile dealerships that last year grossed \$11.6 million.

Tonight, Farr will formally receive the Executive of the Year Award from the Oakland Executives Association, a professional group formed to promote business in Oakland County.

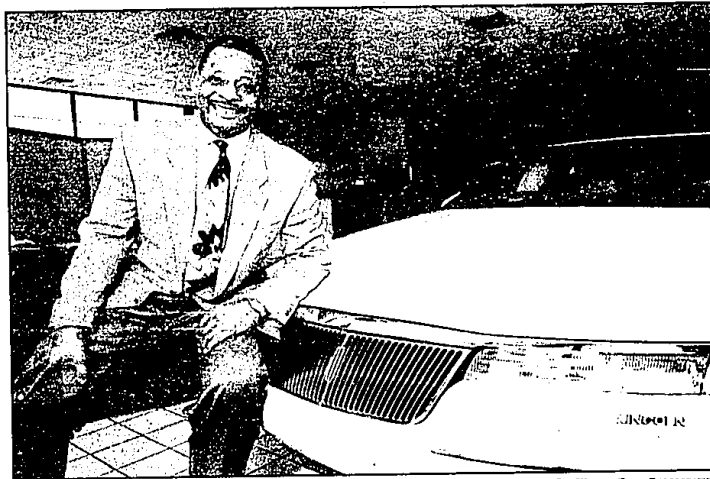
"He built a highly-successful business, weathering all kinds of recessions and economic downturns," said Chuck Hammond, executive director of the Detroit Zoological Society and an executive-of-the-year committee member.

"On top of that, he's found time for leadership roles in many community organizations. The more the group talked about Mr. Farr, investigated his background, the more they were impressed."

Farr is pleased with the award. "It means people are paying attention to what I'm doing. It says I'm on the right track."

Farr, 48, has specialized in breathing new life into financially troubled dealerships. "It wasn't by design. It was the only thing available," he said of his niche.

All four of Farr's acquisitions — Ford dealerships in Oak Park and Fairfield, Ohio; a Lincoln-Mercury dealership in Waterford and a Toyota dealership in Bloomfield Hills — either were bankrupt or losing money, he said.



Executive honored: Mel Farr, formerly an all-pro football player, now makes his mark in the auto retailing business and in community service.

## Off-season work

Farr worked in a management training program at Ford for seven years during off-seasons learning the intricacies of the auto business. At the same time he finished his college degree at the University of Detroit. "I was a high-placed executive with the auto company, didn't give him any special assistance," Farr said.

"Back then, I couldn't say I wanted to be head coach of the Lions, general manager of the Lions, because no

blacks were holding those positions," Farr said. "When I started working for Ford in '68, Ford put in its first black dealer and that became a tangible goal for Mel Farr."

"I exacted all of my energies and efforts to learn that business," he said. "I invested every penny I saved as a football player in my first dealership."

That was in 1976, a year after his retirement from the Lions. Now, Farr prefers to concentrate on the broad picture while leaving de-

tails to others in his organization.

"I get involved in motivational type of management as opposed to going in and being very cold and analytic," he said.

## Priceless commodity

"I believe my motto is if my people are better, I have a priceless advantage over the competition. I think I'm a people person, that I have the ability to see good in people and am able

See FARR, 2C

# Family-owned businesses enjoy long-term association

By MARY RODRIGUE  
STAFF WRITER

For more than half a century, two family-owned businesses in the metro Detroit area have had a professional relationship that still continues to flourish.

When Livermore Service Inc. was founded in 1940 by Harold Livermore to service oil burners and furnaces, Answering Service Inc. already had a dozen years in the telephone message service industry.

Livermore hooked up with ASI in 1942, and today it's still getting its messages from the Southfield company.

"I can't say enough good things about ASI," said Ann Livermore, "Baker, who runs the company founded by her late father."

"They are efficient and helpful, and they treat our customers like we do. They are very family oriented."

Jim Robinson is third generation at ASI, founded by his maternal grandfather John Engerson. His father George Robinson is currently president. He and his brother John are vice presidents. Jim started working at ASI in 1969, while still a col-

lege student. Today he oversees operations.

"We're just here to help people communicate," he said. "It's pleasant to answer for companies like Livermore."

"We've come a long way since my grandfather founded the company in 1928. We've gone from cord boards and handwritten messages to computerized message centers."

His wife, Kathy Robinson, a customer service representative, gives a more enchanting picture of the early days.

"When the company began, they used candlestick phones with luggage tags (affixed) to see which phones were ringing."

Today ASI has 187 employees in 10 offices servicing 4,700 clients throughout southeastern Michigan.

"We're not a machine. We're real people here. Our clients range from private residences to attorneys and medical people. Some people use us when they go on vacation. We can customize any type of package the customer wants," said Kathy Robinson.

"Many companies have been with us 30, 40 years or more.

We're humbled by it," said her husband.

"There are probably only a dozen 24-hour answering services in the whole metro area. Several of our competitors went out of business in the last few years. We haven't tapped the story here yet."

When Livermore hooked up with ASI in 1942, it offered live telephone answering and wake up services. Today services have expanded to include a wide variety of paging, voice mail and long distance services.

Likewise, Livermore has blossomed as a heating and cooling service, adding lawn mower and snow blower repair. They have kept their original northwest Detroit location on Fenkell west of Greenfield.

"Both Livermore and ASI have had to grow and adapt to new technology, yet they still have maintained the personal touch missing from many companies," Kathy Robinson said. "Family owned and operated businesses are becoming more scarce. To have two such firms that have patronized each other for over 50 years is indeed a rarity."

# Contest focuses on electric cars

By R.J. KING  
SPECIAL WRITER

Have a good idea on how electric vehicles can be recharged as quickly as a service station fill-up? Or perhaps there's already an electric vehicle in the garage, and all that's needed is a little capital?

A national planning and design competition with strong local ties was recently unveiled to help shape the future infrastructure needed to accommodate electric vehicles.

The competition calls for teams of architects, economists, engineers and urban planners to design changes in existing service stations, electrical outlets and freeways to make them more accessible to silent-propulsion vehicles.

Sponsors of the competition include General Motors, Detroit Edison, Electronic Data Systems, the Department of Energy, the Edison Electric Institute and Hughes Power Control Systems, a GM subsidiary.

"Professionals from various disciplines will bring a unique contribution to the planning process," said John Dabela, director of market development for GM Electric Vehicles and chairman of the competition. "By linking phase well in advance, our cities can develop practical solutions to support electric vehicles."

Esaku Kondo, a Bloomfield Hills architect who now works as an industry consultant, said he entered the competition as a way to draw on his professional train-

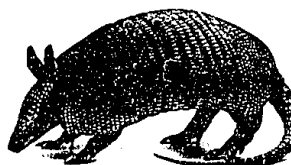
ing, which includes a master's of architecture degree in urban design from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

"The electric vehicle has some handicaps when compared to motorized vehicles. It's slower, needs constant recharging, doesn't travel as far and is very expensive," said Kondo, 68, former architect for Minoru Yamasaki Associates in Rochester and MKK Technologies Inc. in Livonia.

"The competition gives me a chance to go back to school, so to speak. Right now there's just a lot of ideas floating in my head, and I haven't prepared any drawings yet. But I'm going to look seriously at central business districts

See CONTEST, 2C

# We designed our cars around an age-old idea: help protect what's inside.



This concept of protection has been kicking around since time began. In the car world, however, things like steel spaceframes, standard driver-side airbags, energy-absorbing steering columns — a lot of things that help protect you — are all pretty recent. And with every Saturn, all quite standard.

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