



Julie Thomas

Managing Director, Car-O-Liner Australia

WE CHAT WITH JULIE THOMAS, WHO SHARES HER EXPERIENCES AND THE WISDOM FROM HER 30-YEAR JOURNEY AND DISCOVER A RESILIENT, DRIVEN, COMMITTED AND CARING PROFESSIONAL BUSINESSWOMAN WHO IS THE EPITOME OF EVERYTHING THAT IS GREAT ABOUT OUR INDUSTRY.

Julie Thomas has been a stalwart of our industry for three decades, so to kick things off, I ask her to share a bit of background about herself and how she came to be in the collision repair industry.

"It all started back in 1984 when my husband, Barrie Thomas, started working for the Australian Car-O-Liner distributor as a sales technician. At the time I had my own full-time job with the Department of Social Security and had virtually no involvement in the industry. But that all changed in 1990 when it was suggested that Barrie and I buy the company, although we were

both reluctant to make such a significant commitment."

The hierarchy at the Car-O-Liner organisation encouraged Barrie and Julie to give it more serious thought and so they sought independent advice from a couple of different sources, both of whom made a strong recommendation to proceed, which led to them taking the plunge, with some support from Car-O-Liner in Sweden to get them up and running.

Although Barrie was the principal contact and the real driver of the business, their youngest daughter Nicolle joined the business straight from school

and together they made the business work. "My earliest involvement was when I came in on a part-time basis to implement the ISO 9000 quality management system, with which I had experience in my 'day job'."

In 1997, things took a devastating turn and Julie was thrown into the deep end. "It was a critical time for the industry, particularly in NSW as repairers and insurers were at loggerheads, and as result our sales also dried up. It was a challenging time for everyone, and it was at this time that I lost Barrie in tragic circumstances. With the support of my family, friends and one of our employees at the time, Terry Feehan, I was able to keep going."

Julie continued: "It really was important that I got back to work so, knowing virtually nothing about the business, I decided to defy all logic and continue to run the company. With the support of the small sales team at the time and particularly my daughter Nicolle, I was able to learn on the run and we kept the business going."

On the recommendation of a close friend, Julie also reached out and engaged a business mentor and coach, John Ryan, who continued to provide guidance until late last year. John was there to support, guide, advise and, of course, push Julie when she needed to be pushed. Julie is adamant that everyone should have someone to go to, someone to lean on when times are tough – no-one should have to go it alone – and for her, John has been a real inspiration.

"John recommended that I engage a marketing advisor and one of the first things he taught me was the importance of the brand, and how



Julie Thomas.

to make Car-O-Liner the brand that's top of mind whenever you think of equipment in our industry. I also used someone to create our promotional material as I knew we needed to make a statement in the industry that we were still here, and here to stay. From a business sense, these three advisors were critical in those early years."

Fast forward to 2020. I asked Julie what it is that keeps the Car-O-Liner brand top of mind in today's highly competitive landscape. "As a global player, our reputation for quality, reliability, innovation and longevity is exceptional. In addition, our extensive range of global OEM approvals means that our customers can continue to rely on Car-O-Liner as the car manufacturers accelerate their influence in our industry."

Julie added: "I firmly believe, however, that it's so much more than that. It's the service, knowledge, capabilities, relationships and commitment to continuous improvement that we here at Car-O-Liner Australia deliver to our customers on an ongoing basis. In addition, our team of globally trained practitioners are passionate about our brand, our products and our customers - it doesn't get any better than that."

Julie also goes on to say that one of the things she learned from Barrie was the importance of appreciating, recognising and rewarding your staff, which in turn really engenders dedication, engagement and commitment. "We just don't lose staff, unless there are extenuating circumstances, such as personal reasons or a change in career. Of course, the most devastating loss was when our Queensland Manager, Bob Rees, passed away in 2010 in a tragic workplace accident - we were all so devastated, and still miss him to this day."

We turn our attention to Julie's greatest achievements as a professional businesswoman, as she looks back over the journey. "Since taking on the Australian distribution for Car-O-Liner, we have won the international sales award on five occasions, an award which is per-capita based, making us one of the most successful and highly-

regarded distributors within the global Car-O-Liner organisation." Julie also says that receiving the National Collision Repairer Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014 is something of which she is immensely proud.

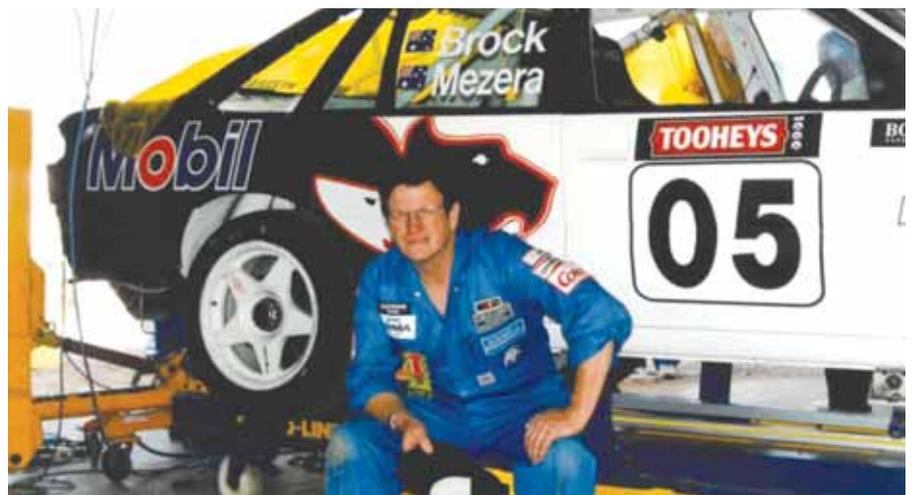
During her Award ceremony, it was noted that to survive in our industry and be so successful speaks volumes about this great businesswoman. She has always supported the industry behind the scenes during some turbulent times and has also sponsored just about every group, workshop, seminar and trade show over many years and continues to be strong supporter of I-CAR Australia and WorldSkills.

When we move on to the topic of who has been her greatest inspiration throughout her journey, Julie is unequivocal. "My biggest inspiration without doubt came from my husband

Barrie. For those who knew him, he truly was a unique individual, loved by everyone and a one-of-a-kind human being who had a truly great outlook on life. As I mentioned before, Barrie showed how we should treat people, manage people and lead people in so many different circumstances."

Since the acquisition by Snap-on in 2016, some of the Car-O-Liner systems and processes have been streamlined, which has improved their internal efficiencies; however, in the main there has been little impact on Car-O-Liner Australia. They continue to get great support, although they are under no illusions that delivering on their commitments and getting the results must be very much front of mind.

I then asked Julie what advice she would give other women considering a career in our industry and she pointed out that people who are new to our industry



Barrie Thomas with the Car-O-Liner bench at Bathurst.



Julie receives her Lifetime Achievement Award.



should understand that there will be some tough times, but they will pass. And, as in her case, the rewards will far outweigh the negatives. "I've also met some wonderful people in our industry, many of whom have become personal friends, and I've also met some very inspiring people at various seminars around the world." Julie then shared a thought from way back in 1997. "I decided I'd keep doing this until something else came along. Well, nothing else came along and so, after all this time, I've become accepted and respected in what is still a male-dominated industry – it's been a great experience and is a great career pathway for women in automotive in the 2020s."

2020 will go down in history as a once in a generation year that we have all had to endure. However, it is also a milestone year for Car-O-Liner Australia. "It's 30 years since Barrie and I bought the Car-O-Liner distributorship in Australia and, as I mentioned, I decided to continue the journey in 1997. In our 30th year I look back and wonder where the time went. It's been a very busy, exciting and challenging journey, and a steep learning curve at times." Over the past three decades Julie and the team have weathered several local and global economic downturns and it's a real credit to her resilience and commitment that Car-O-Liner Australia is alive and well and celebrating this milestone.

We touch on the impact of the coronavirus-induced economic impact in 2020, and Julie is cautiously optimistic. "The results have not been where they have been in recent years – obviously; however, with government support overall we're doing okay, and in the current circumstances, I suggest okay is pretty good. If I look ahead to 2021 and beyond, I really will need a crystal ball. Most of the country is well on the road to recovery but it all depends on how Victoria comes out of the current situation."

This comment is borne out by others in the industry, and with Victoria representing approximately 25% of total car registrations in Australia, it will be a critical part of the automotive industry's recovery.

Julie also points out the growing

influence of manufacturers in the repair process, which only goes to reinforce the importance of Car-O-Liner's previously mentioned leading position with global OEM approvals. It is self-evident that this is more important than at any time in the history of the automotive repair industry.

As for opportunities in the coming years, Julie believes that the tangible opportunities lie in their commitment to innovation, maintaining their global leadership position with OEM approvals, and continuing to deliver their service programs. However, until she sees what 2021 will look like, Julie says that other opportunities will be difficult to identify.

I touch on the question of succession planning, the perennial challenge for every privately-owned business, but Julie just politely deflects it away. "We will weather the

COVID-19-induced recession and adapt to the changing environment, as we have for the past 30 years. We will come back better and stronger than ever and set a course for our future. Succession planning is not on the foreseeable horizon."

So, in summary, I ask Julie for a closing comment, and once again I find someone who is full of surprises. "When I look back at the last 30 years, I truly believe I wouldn't have done it any other way. I've been fortunate to have the staff I've had over the years, and I'm extremely grateful for their dedication and commitment. You know, many people walk through our lives but only a few leave footprints on our heart. I have been so fortunate to have met quite a few of these people, some not with us anymore, but many more who are still here today. If you ask me if I would do it all again, the answer is, absolutely!"



Julie with her daughter Lisa McKellar at NACE.



Julie with her partner, Tim Sieber at SEMA.



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Head Office: Unit 1, 25 Industrial Road, Unanderra, NSW 2526

Ph: (02) 4271 6287 ▲ Fax: (02) 4271 7899

Website: www.car-o-liner.com.au ▲ Email: julie@car-o-liner.com.au

▲ NSW & Tas: Fritz Pfeffer – Ph: 0412 559 208

▲ NT & Vic: Lindsay Batten – Ph: 0412 372 988

▲ Qld & SA: Liam Hugo – Ph 0403 455 914

