Ed Copenhaver has been a co-owner of Frager’s Hardware for 37 years. On February 1, 2012, he retired. Ed’s take on his own retirement party illustrates the way Ed Copenhaver thinks about things. Ed said that he was really looking forward to the planned retirement party, because he saw it not so much his own personal celebration, but more like a Frager’s employee reunion.

“A lot of really good folks have worked with me over all of these years,” said Ed, “and it is going to be wonderful to get everyone together.” Ed is just now getting used to not being in the store every day and says while he definitely has some things on his “to-do” list, he has been taking it pretty easy so far.

Even if you are one of the few who is not familiar with the name Ed Copenhaver, if you have shopped in the hardware store in the past three decades, you would immediately recognize his face. Ed was often the first person to greet customers as they stepped into the store. Frager’s is one of those places where you push open the door and instantly know you have stepped into a time machine and been transported back into time. In this case, it would be the 1920’s when Fritz Frager first opened the store. By the time Ed and his co-owner and long-time friend, John Weintraub, bought the store in 1975, the hardware store had become somewhat a household name in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, so the name stuck.

In fact, Ed says, George Frager, one of Mr. Frager sons, stayed on at the store to help teach him and John the ropes of managing a retail hardware business. Ed’s eyes twinkle when he says that George’s motivation for mentoring the new owners served a dual purpose. “George needed an excuse to get to the Hill to keep a long-standing relationship going with his lady. But, for me, it was really instrumental to have George around,” said Ed. “I remember one of the first things George did was teach us how to count out the money from the registers at the end of the day. Of course, today everything is computerized making the business much different.”

The soft southern drawl of Ed Copenhaver comes from being raised in Virginia and graduating from University of Virginia and, where he met his business partner, John. He is the kind of person who makes you feel he has all the time in the world to listen to your story and then head you in the right direction. Ed says that learning the art of listening is probably the one thing that has made his business career such a success. “It took me a little while to realize that whether it is a customer or an employee, the best thing I can do is really listen to what they want, and then see how I can help them with the situation.” Interestingly, Ed recalls that he picked up on the art of listening from a training film he watched during his three years of service in the Navy during the Vietnam era. This movie showed a young serviceman going to his officers wanting to talk about a problem. The first officer has his head buried in paperwork, and tells the sailor to come back later. The young man seeks out another officer, who also is working on his paper work, but he looks up and invites the young person to sit and listens to his story. “I immediately could see what a difference this one act of listening had on that young soldier,” Ed recalls, “and have always made it a part of my business practice to listen.”

Ed also has enjoyed the mentoring role of hiring young Hill kids for their first after-school job. He says that there are three reasons he believes that these teenagers have made such excellent employees. “The young folks are quick learners; are energetic; and pay attention to what you are telling them.” Of course, not all of them have worked out,” Ed quickly notes. “But, we have been really lucky to offer this chance to work to a lot of young people over the years.”

Frager’s has kept up with the times, despite it often being described as an old fashioned hardware store. It added the garden center to the vacant lot next door when the gardening craze hit, and Ed is amazed at how it has grown from a couple of rolling carts with tomatoes and vegetable plants on it, to a very high-end gardening center. The same is true with the Rental Center that really took off after they were able to purchase the building next door. “Having the extra space has really helped to expand our operations,” Ed noted. “We went from not doing that end of
Ed worked a two week shift where he would take three-days off at the end of each shift and he said never in the 37 years did he feel stressed out, or not want to come into the store. But he says it is time for him to spend time getting in physical shape and do more of the things he loves.

High on that list, after spending time with friends, is sailing. He has enjoyed sailing in Annapolis with another Hill resident every other Friday afternoon for a number of years. Now he hopes to spend more time on the water.

Ed is a little like the cobbler in the folktale about the fellow who’s so busy making everyone their shoes that his children go barefoot. “You know when you work around this stuff all day, I never had much interest in going home and working on my own place.” So, his repair list is a little long, including a bathroom he tore out to remodel the first year he moved into his house some 20 years ago.

For all of us that have benefited from the wisdom of the civil engineer turned hardware store owner, we will miss seeing Ed in his blue Frager’s Hardware apron greeting us at door. But we are thrilled that he will still be around the neighborhood and he says don’t be surprised if occasionally he isn’t filling in for some of the store’s top brass when they are out of town.

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