

Entrepreneurial Spirit

Harold Rist II

BY KIM M. SMITHGALL

"You must live in harmony with the earth. You don't get a second chance."

The words and philosophies of Queensbury High School science teacher Walter Curren have remained with Harold Rist II since 1957. They provided Rist with direction and inspiration in his life and in his work.

"After being in Walter Curren's earth science class, I knew I would wind up doing something good for the earth," Rist said.

Now, 38 years later, Rist is vice president and general manager of Mechanical Electrical Systems (Mech Elec) in Glens Falls, a company specializing in environmentally-friendly energy systems.

"Mech Elec does 'smart energy,'" Rist said. "We show homeowners and business people how to make the best use of energy with the least impact on the environment. And it just so happens that the most benign methods are also the least expensive to operate."

One of the most benign methods in the market today is Mech Elec's geothermal heating/cooling system. "The geothermal system is a natural method of heating and cooling buildings," Rist explained. "You're not using up any natural resources. You're using the earth itself."

Rist compares the geothermal system to the way a refrigerator works. "You take heat from where you don't want it and put it where you do want it," he said. "It's renewable energy."

The system uses a heat pump, which is coupled to the ground. In the winter, heat from ground water is relocated to the home or business; in the summer, the process is reversed — heat from the home or business is recirculated back into the ground water.

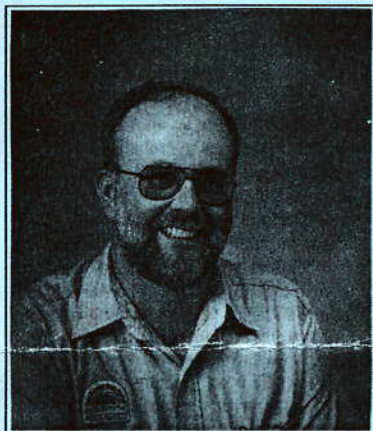
Using the earth's own energy as a fuel — it seems so simple. Why hasn't the idea caught on sooner? "In the last 30 years, we've been a 'use it and throw it away' society," Rist said. "This mode of living included our use of energy. In the last few years, we've started to realize that we need to reuse everything we can."

Mech Elec's business history has some parallels to the changes in societal attitudes. When the company first started in 1972, it dealt with non-renewable types of energy, including gas and oil. A conscious decision resulting from Rist's strong beliefs in renewable, environmentally-friendly energy led to fundamental changes in Mech Elec's offerings. "We have basically eliminated everything except renewables like geothermal and solar energy," he said.

Even then, Mech Elec was still ahead of its time. "It was a slow, uphill fight," Rist said. "We've had to do a lot of educating and it's taken over 20 years to gain credibility."

The education involves proving that energy is not a fixed expense. "Business people and homeowners are starting to look closely at energy costs," Rist said. "When they look at geothermal systems, they find that they can cut their energy costs in half."

Armed with this kind of information and his strong belief in renewable energy, Rist approaches potential clients with both patience and persistence. "I'm persistent, but I don't badger people," he said. "When I set up booths



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at county fairs or malls, I never ask people their names or phone numbers. If they want more information, or they want me to give them a call, they offer their name and number."

He takes the same type of approach when he visits potential customers. "I ask a lot of questions, but I listen even more," he said. "Clients know what they want. They may not be able to put it in technical terms, but if you listen close enough, you'll know their likes, dislikes and concerns." He concludes that he just follows his mother's good advice — "you have two ears and one mouth...use them in that proportion."

Rist's patience, persistence and listening skills have paid off. Mech Elec has installed more than 500 "smart energy" systems since 1972. The company has served areas from Long Island to Quebec, Vermont and Massachusetts. Around 70 percent of the work has been for homeowners or builders, while business owners make up the remaining 30 percent of Mech Elec's business. "The number of businesses looking at renewable energy is growing quickly, though," Rist pointed out.

Each business provides a new array of challenges for Rist and his six-person staff. For example, one Glens Falls restaurant came to Mech Elec for a combination of solutions — more economical energy consumption, removal of customer cigarette smoke, and more comfortable working conditions in the kitchen during the summer months.

Rist was able to come up with the solutions. He proposed Mech Elec's Cigarette Smoke Removal and Waste Energy Recovery System, which recycles the energy from the exhausted smoke. The system saves between 25 and 40 percent of the wasted air conditioning and heating capacity normally thrown away by conventional systems. For the kitchen, Rist recommended a dehumidification system that removes air moisture and, in turn, lowers humidity in the kitchen. The system then transfers and stores this energy as "free" hot water for washing dishes.

Rist has found similar success in a wide range of businesses, including an Elks Club building, funeral parlor, convenience store, dairy plant, post office and a motel chain. Recently, he took on a very new and interesting challenge — providing heat and air condition-

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ing in a milking parlor on a Washington County farm.

"The client wanted to be able to heat and cool the parlor, but regular, fuel-burning energy was out of the question because hay is stored on top of the parlor," Rist said. "Hay is very combustible, so it isn't safe to burn any kind of fuel."

A strong belief in his work also helps Rist in his entrepreneurial successes. "When you're running a business, you have to believe in what you're doing," he advised. "You can't let minor setbacks bother you — you have to look at the long-range picture."

Before Rist brought his entrepreneurial spirit to Mech Elec, he earned a degree in mechanical engineering, worked for IBM Corporation, and spent 10 years in the Navy in the areas of nuclear energy and electronics.

He seems to have come full circle — from the planting of environmentally-conscious seeds in a Queensbury High School classroom to the running of the day-to-day operations at a company that saves money while it saves the earth. Rist's enthusiasm for his work is contagious.

"Even after so many years of working with the geothermal system, I'm still very excited about it. I want to get as many people as possible involved in this technology," Rist said.

He is equally enthusiastic about his family and about spending time outdoors. "I enjoy my family very much," Rist said. "My wife, Sandy, is my inspiration and my best friend."

Rist, 50, has been married for 10 years. He and his wife have four children. In the rare times when he isn't putting in 75-hour work weeks, Rist can be found in the Adirondacks.

"I really spent a lot of time outside this summer," he said. "It is simply gorgeous here. I watched a golden eagle swoop down and pick up a large fish. I've seen wolves...close up. I saw moose...close up. It's incredible what nature and the environment have to offer. It reaffirms what I'm doing in my work. It reaffirms my belief that we not only live in the best country in the world, but also in the best part of that country." □