



Culligan
Water Conditioning

Third Generation

Culligan-Dealership, Bloomington, IL

By Jennifer Gibson Hebert, JSJ Productions, Inc.

Kourtney Tarvin Erbes



1. What is the generational history of your dealership? (please give a bio about how you became a dealer and significant milestones over the years)

Culligan of Mclean County was established in 1956. Richard H Tarvin and Allen Hutchison, his partner, started the business in Shirley, Illinois. For nearly a year Richard would drive to Champaign, IL and pick up 20 portable exchange tanks three times per week. That was difficult with a ¾ ton pickup. They built a 2200 foot warehouse in Normal, IL towards the end of 1957. The majority of their business was portable exchange tanks, which grew to over 1400 accounts. Richard Tarvin was designated the primary installer/serviceman for most of his career.

Richard's partner passed away in 1979 and Richard purchased the remainder of the business on January 1, 1982. John Tarvin, Richard's son, joined him in the business on February 15, 1982. John's first test was attending Culligan Sales School taught by Walt Allen. Both Richard and John attended the sales school together. John credits Walt with any degree of success he has attained. Walt was a great mentor to John.

The Culligan dealership really began to grow after John's arrival. John enjoyed the success of the dealership alongside his father. For the first 15 years of John's career he spent time in the field selling. He was Salesman of the Year for Illinois (District #9) in 1992. After 1992 and throughout the mid 90's John joined Richard in making more management decisions. John hired two sales people to replace him and started looking for new challenges. Richard and John decided to convert their business of 1400 PE tanks to automatic units which took between 5-6 years.

Richard and John found the key to success and the right ingredients for growth: an aggressive marketing program, a relentless pursuit of perfection in customer service, an outstanding work ethic, and a team atmosphere among the employees that really give a sense for family. In 1992 the Tarvin's began looking for a location to lease or purchase warehouse space to store their trucks and salt inventory. Their initial thoughts for a warehouse soon changed and blossomed into a full-blown building project, uniting their two satellite locations in Shirley and Normal into a new 8100 square foot facility in Bloomington, IL. 18 months later, after adding bottled water to the business; the Tarvin's ran out of space and added an additional 6000 square feet to and 2600 foot mezzanine to the building. In the first 11 months after John and Richard got into the bottled water industry, they obtained over 400 accounts. The Tarvin's are very proud to have earned Culligan's Circle of Excellence award 10 out of the 12 years which included two appearances in The Winner's Circle and three in the President's Circle. One of Richard's fondest memories was being able to attend six great Culligan trips. Richard was presented his 50-year award by Mr. Tom Vitacco and Mr. Larry Holzman at his bedside in 2006. Richard passed away one year later in 2007 never officially retiring from the business and having "Hey Culligan Man" etched into his headstone.

Tarvin's Culligan is nearly ten times larger than when John started in 1982. Kourtney joined John and Richard in the family business in April of 2003 while in High School. Kourtney worked as a customer service rep in the office after school, on weekends, and during the summer. Kourtney attended Illinois State and continued to work in the Culligan dealership learning more about the business and gradually taking on more tasks. During her college career Kourtney expressed her interest to John in joining the family business full-time once she graduated. John and his wife Sharon thought it would be better for



John, Sharon, Heather Young (John's daughter), Travis (Heather's husband), Kourtney, Davis and Reagan (John's grandchildren).

Portable Exchange Truck, Shirley, IL

“ Together with Kourtney's fresh ideas and John's experience we are hoping to take the dealership to the next level. ”
— Steve Serbin, Regional Sales Director

Kourtney to gain experience in business outside the dealership for at least 2 years before considering her request. After Kourtney graduated from Illinois State she joined State Farm Insurance Company, Bloomington's largest employer, and worked for the company for 3 years. After countless family dinners, and John explaining the benefits and challenges to Kourtney over several weeks of conversation, Kourtney rejoined the business in April of 2012 as Assistant General Manager. Upon rejoining the business Kourtney attended New Dealer School in September of 2012, Commercial C&I forum in October 2012, got married October 2012, obtained her Culligan sales license in November 2012, and attended Culligan Sales School in December 2012 before rounding out the year. John was extremely impressed with her dedication to the business and her efforts and named her General Manager in December 2012. John states, "I am extremely proud of Kourtney's efforts and I am sure her grandfather is happy to have her as a Culligan Lady". John currently allows Kourtney to manage the affairs of the business and operations as General Manager and John's current title is President and Owner of Richard H. Tarvin Inc. DBA Culligan Water. Together with Kourtney's fresh ideas and John's experience they are looking to take the dealership to the next level.

2. Kourtney – Did you always want to be a Culligan Woman? Does your new husband work in the business?

I have always seen myself as the Culligan lady even though I didn't know if I wanted to be a part of the business until I was attending Illinois State. I started as a newborn with a Culligan bear in my crib, learned how to walk in the Culligan office, rode my first bike (with training wheels) in the Culligan warehouse, and grew up in the dealership from there. Before Kindergarten, John would bring me in the office and I would nap under the marketing display. Culligan is my life. I even came to the dealership to take photos in my wedding gown because this is who I am. I don't think there are many other women who would say that they came into the Culligan office on their wedding day! Currently my husband does not work in the business with me.



Kourtney Working Culligan Event – Normal's Day of Play

I did keep Tarvin as part of my name since the community knows and recognizes it. My name as seen on my business card and emails is Kourtney Tarvin Erbes.

3. How many dealerships do you own?

At this time we only have one dealership. John purchased a dealership in Taylorville, IL, which has since been sold to another dealer. Maybe in the future we will have an opportunity to acquire another. We always keep our options open.

4. Do you have any other family working in the business?

John and I are the only family working in the business. Richard's wife, Naomi Tarvin, and John's wife, Sharon Tarvin, are a part of the board.

5. What do you like best about being a Culligan Dealer?

Culligan is a leader in the water treatment industry. It is an honor working for such a reputable company where we can better the lives of our customers every day with water treatment solutions. As a dealer we can stand behind our products and services and know that Culligan has been around for over 75 years and our dealership in this community for 57 years!

6. Who has been your biggest mentor towards your success? Both of you!

John would say Walt Allen from Culligan Sales School and his father Richard. For me, both Richard and John have been and continue to be my greatest mentors. Since rejoining the Culligan organization last year I have made some great relationships and mentors in the Culligan dealer network, Elmer Parks, Steve Gibson, Jeff Owens, Donna Bruner, David Lau, and Steve Serbin, my regional sales director.



John and Richard Tarvin



Kourtney and husband Cody, Bloomington Office



John and Kourtney

“ I knew I had to build a name for myself and not be John’s daughter. ”

— Kourtney Tarvin Erbes

7. It is so great to see a father and daughter working in the Culligan business together? Can you tell us more about the strengths and weaknesses that makes this work for the two of you?

John is my mentor, boss, father, and friend, as he was with his father. This working relationship is not always easy but we do a great job. The first thing we had to do was separate our relationship from father/daughter to employer/employee. I call John or JT at work and he calls me Kourtney to keep things professional and distinguish the fact that we have a working relationship. Coming back into the business I had to build a name for myself and show the employees and customers I was dedicated to the position and to taking care of them. I did all the Culligan schools my first 8 months to show them how motivated I was to succeed in this role. I knew I had to build a name for myself and not be John’s daughter. Some of the employees watched me grow up so going from friend to boss was difficult. John is established in the community as a good businessman, volunteer, and friend... its critical for me to continue to get involved and stay involved so I can build the reputation he has for myself. Networking is so important along with being credible to those around you.



John and fellow DAC Members

8. What has been your biggest challenge as a Culligan Dealer – both of you?

Our challenges are no different than what other dealers face. Big box stores offering products without offering consumers the education to understand their water and proper application. The rise of competitors which makes it easy in the consumers to bundle their services and provide them with a low cost inadequate solution for their water needs, since they are a gas company. And lastly the lack of Culligan brand awareness for those under 45 years old. My generation (Kourtney’s), if they know Culligan at all, knows Culligan to be associated with



John and Richard working together, Normal, IL office



Circle of Excellence Award Presented to Richard 1987



Kourtney's First Bike from Her Grandparents, Richard & Naomi, Hidden in Richard's Office



Tarvin & Erbes Wedding Party

“ We always keep our options open for the next business endeavor. ”

— Kourtney Tarvin Erbes

bottled water rather than softeners and drinking water systems. Consumers today call everything “filtered”.

It becomes the dealers job to educate the consumer on what “filtered” means and how we do business. For John, it is keeping current on everything, growing your business every year, and maintaining a high level of performance by your staff.

9. Where do you see the future of your business and this industry?

We would like to continue to grow our revenue and penetrate our market share. Our dealership has been on a plateau for 2-3 years

and we would like to continue to see improvements in that area. We would also like to grow our knowledge and gain

success in the commercial industry. We always keep our options open for the next business endeavor.

10. Do you have hobbies/interest outside of work? (I am sure you do!)

John enjoys golfing once or twice a week with his league or with his wife. He enjoys spending time with his two grandchildren Reagan and Davis. Yes, he loves traveling and currently spends a

lot of time in Arizona with Sharon in Sun Lakes. John is a proud Rotarian and past president and enjoys giving back to the community – when he’s not traveling :).

Kourtney is a chair on the Steering Committee for Women of Distinction of Central IL YWCA. She enjoys volunteering her time to organize the annual event honoring six distinguished women of the community. Kourtney enjoys being a youth group leader for ten high school girls from her church along with working with at risk students. Other hobbies include reading, and taking care of her grandmother, Naomi Tarvin.

11. You have both contributed to the entire system for quite a long time? Can you tell us what committees and groups you have been a part of including CDANA?

Richard and John were both on the DAC, Dealers Advisory Counsel. Richard served two terms and John served on the DAC for 2 terms or 6 years. We have all been a part of CDANA. Kourtney joined the Indiana Sales Management Forum thanks to Elmer Parks.

12. What is unique about being a Culligan Dealer in your area? Is John always on vacation?

Unlike some franchises we only have one county, Mclean, with a few towns surrounding the county. We don’t have a big area to work with but we work hard. We have great neighboring dealers.

John is what we call a “snow bird” now. He will probably be just like his father and work in the dealership until the day he dies even if he is not present every day. John loves being involved in the business, staying connected to the employees and the community.

13. Do you have a favorite quote or story that has been passed to you that helps you in your business everyday?

I (Kourtney) learned quickly to “take care of your people and they will take care of you”. This statement relates to both our employees and customers. I have 16-18 employees at all times and we are a family. You see each other every day, you have good day’s together and tough times, but through a good work ethic you always persevere. I learned to be a good listener as a boss, mentor, and friend. Continuous learning is the key to success. I was told, “The day you stop learning is the day you die”.

14. What are your words of wisdom for the next generation of Culligan men and women?

The best words of wisdom I can offer are telling those folks to be dedicated to what they do and have a vision. Try something for 90 days, measure your success, and if you aren’t happy with the results try something else. Continue to evolve and change. Our franchise and our fellow dealers will continue to prosper with new direction of the Culligan Corporate Leadership Team. 💧



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