

Charles “Dom” D’Ascoli

2013 Weinstock Person of the Year



By Bob Ogle

Dom D’Ascoli has the kind of personality that draws attention when he walks into a room, no matter what else might be happening. When he talks – especially with that distinctive New York accent – people listen. There’s no pretense; when he says what he means, he absolutely means what he says. He’s not intimidating or egotistical, but he definitely has a commanding presence.

While his presence might be the first thing people notice about Dom, it’s not

why he is the recipient of the industry’s highest honor, the 2013 Morris F. Weinstock Person of the Year Award, sponsored by Interlogix.

He is the recipient of the award because of his remarkable record of leadership over the years, most recently as ESA’s immediate past president. It’s his willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done, and to place the needs of the industry above everything else. It’s a clear vision of the industry’s future, along with the backbone to stand up for tough decisions that are required in order to get there. Finally, it’s an understanding that it’s not just about

the willingness to take risks – it’s about learning from any stumbles that might occur along the way.

Each year, the winner is nominated by ESA board members and then selected by Weinstock recipients from previous years, honoring outstanding achievement and ongoing efforts on behalf of the association. Former Weinstock honoree ESA Vice President David Koenig and ESA President John Knox nominated D’Ascoli for the award.

“I know his dedication and the amount of time he’s spent on the association,” Knox

says. “I’ve seen it first-hand, so it was a very easy decision. He’s served unselfishly, and, so many times, I’ve watched him put his own company’s business aside to take care of ESA business first.”

ESA Executive Director Merlin Guilbeau agrees that being the association’s president requires an incredible level of sacrifice.

“All of our volunteers are important to the association, but not all volunteers are created equal,” Guilbeau says. “It’s interesting to see the different commitment levels of volunteers, and without a doubt Dom’s level rises beyond the call of duty.”

D’Ascoli’s record of service to the industry has been nothing short of remarkable. It started in 1984 as a member of the Georgia Electronic Life Safety and Systems Association (GELSSA), where he served three years as secretary. In 1995, he joined the North Carolina Electronic Security Association (NCESA) and served one term as vice president, one term as treasurer, and two nonconsecutive terms as president.

At ESA, his roles have included chairman of the Standards committee, as well as being part of the Elections, Investment and Education committees. In 2007, he was elected as an ESA vice president, and served in that capacity before becoming president in 2010.

The story could easily end there, since that level of accomplishment is more than enough to justify receiving the Weinstock award. But ask D’Ascoli a few questions and you’ll hear a lot more.

The city kid heads south

Given the heavy accent, it would be easy to place D’Ascoli on the noisy streets of New York instead of in the serene mountains of western North Carolina. But in 1982 he founded Smoky Mountain Systems in Franklin, N.C. – population 3,896, give or take a few – after a journey that started in Brooklyn, with a life-changing period in southern Florida.



As a teenager, D’Ascoli says, his life turned in a positive direction after he moved from Brooklyn to Florida.

“I grew up on the streets, and I was a troublesome kid,” D’Ascoli says. After one particular brush with the law, “the court told me that if I moved out of New York, there’d be no prosecuting me.”

That’s how he ended up living with an aunt in Fort Lauderdale at age 17. “It turned me around,” he says. “It changed my life to be around a different element. I loved Fort Lauderdale, and I started to flourish there.”

Even after nearly 40 years in western North Carolina, D’Ascoli is proud to report that the city guy is alive and well, though he can move easily between the urban and rural worlds.

“I talk like a Yankee, and people remind me of that frequently,” he says. “I have all the big-city habits, but I can mix with clientele from the city and also with the ‘smart-like-a-fox’ good old boys.”

Call of duty

Much of D’Ascoli’s life has been shaped by his time in the Army Signal Corps after leaving Fort Lauderdale. He worked as a communications specialist, maintaining microwave sites in West Germany. He’s particularly proud of becoming a sergeant (E-5) in 13 months, which was a remarkably short amount of time.

That military experience has affected the causes he supports *[continued on page 28]*

Dom D’Ascoli receives Humanitarian Award from Mission 500

The Morris F. Weinstock Person of the Year Award certainly isn’t the only recognition Dom D’Ascoli has received this year acknowledging his efforts on behalf of others.

Mission 500, which is this year’s official charity for ESA Gives Back, selected D’Ascoli for its 2014 Humanitarian Award, which recognizes security industry professionals who make a positive contribution to children and families in need. D’Ascoli received the award on April 1 at ISC West in Las Vegas.

D’Ascoli is active in a number of charitable causes, but families – and children in particular – receive a great deal of attention. He has made an impact in many ways, including chairman of

the Children’s Home Society of Broward County in Florida; chairman of the Macon County (N.C.) Department of Social Services; president of REACH (Resources, Education Assistance, Counseling and Housing) of Macon County; a member of the Child Fatality Board for Macon County; an ardent supporter of Habitat for Humanity; and past chair of the Finance Council at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic church.

D’Ascoli also is a founding member of the Franklin (N.C.) Daybreak Rotary Club, through which he works to help eradicate polio around the world, and also has developed numerous water projects worldwide. His dedication to the Rotary Club has resulted in a number of Paul Harris Fellow awards.



Dom D’Ascoli received the Mission 500 Humanitarian Award in April at ISC West in Las Vegas.

with his time and money. He has a soft spot for veterans and their families, particularly those who are in need. He has been extensively involved in the Veterans Airlift Command, in which a network of volunteer pilots provides free air transportation for medical treatment and other purposes to those wounded in 9/11 combat, as well as their families.

It doesn't stop there. D'Ascoli supports a number of military causes – such as the Wounded Warrior Project and the Warrior Dog Foundation, to name a couple – and



D'Ascoli's adulthood was profoundly shaped by his experience as a sergeant in the Army Signal Corps.

his contributions aren't limited to his checkbook. He also mentors veterans with PTSD and other issues, and his wife Marla supports families who face challenges living with veterans who are assimilating back into civilian life.

"It's gratifying to know that you're making a difference," he says. "You can help wives with the things they go through with their husbands, and give the families someone to talk to. But when you're not there, the families still have to deal with the situation. These things don't go away."

In addition to military causes, D'Ascoli's support ranges from children's services, women's shelters and other social causes to a list of civic organizations like Rotary International, Knights of Columbus and United Way, although he admits that there have been so many causes over the years, it's hard to keep track.

He also admits that he has a hard time saying no. "If you talk to my wife, she'd tell you that," he says. "I'm getting better at it,

but I try to help out a lot of different causes in some small degree as much as I can."

An entrepreneurial spirit

Like many ESA members, D'Ascoli is known for being an entrepreneur and a hard-nosed businessman with an eye on the bottom line. However, security wasn't his first choice for starting a business. In fact, it's not widely known that he started out as a "techie," with emphasis on telecom expertise.

He returned to south Florida after the military, and worked at Southern Bell in a number of positions. After establishing a vacation home in western North Carolina, he decided it would be a great place to raise a family.

"I tried to find a company to go to work for, but I was overqualified for anything in that area," he says. "After doing contract work, I figured out that I knew more about technology than the average bear. So I utilized that knowledge to go into business for myself."

The result was Smoky Mountain Systems, which started strictly as a telephone company. The security business followed close behind in 1984 after a cousin with that background moved to the area. Trying to stay ahead of the curve, D'Ascoli continued to develop his technology vision by establishing an audiovisual company, becoming an internet service provider, and by doing web design and hosting. As the technology evolved, his businesses grew to include wireless communications, underground fiber infrastructure and home automation.

The entrepreneur is alive and kicking, but D'Ascoli is still a techie at heart. "I deal better with the technical and engineering side of the house," he says. "I've always felt that when a technician comes in at the end of the day, I can look at his tickets and know what he did, and how much money he generated."

"It's not that I don't have my hand in the managerial part," he adds, "but that's what I have Sam for."

"Sam" is Sam Fiske, general manager and chief operating officer at Smoky Mountain Systems, as well as an active volunteer at ESA and the most recent Sara E. Jackson Award recipient. Having

been with the company for the past 17 years, he tends to balance D'Ascoli's entrepreneurial drive with a sense of practicality and pragmatism.

"He's an entrepreneur by every definition," Fiske says. "Entrepreneurs are thinkers and idea people, and he likes to put ideas out there and get feedback, just to see what people are thinking and what they say. He always tries to surround himself with good people. He has an ability to draw ideas from others, incorporate his own, and make it a team effort."

Faith and values

One would think that two people from extremely different backgrounds – "a New York Italian and a Southern boy," as Fiske puts it – might be an uneasy match. But they have one very important thing in common. While D'Ascoli is Catholic and Fiske is Southern Baptist, faith in God is the cornerstone for both of their lives.

"We're very similar in our basic beliefs and morals," Fiske says. "Even though we come from different religions, we still have a lot of common ground. That comes from parents who believed in the fundamental themes of family."

D'Ascoli is quick to acknowledge that his faith is his rock, and it forms the foundation for his personal values, especially when it comes to giving back to others. "I grew up in a family that had strong religious values," he says. "I'm a devout Catholic, so doing things



D'Ascoli (center, in a birthday photo) acknowledges the importance of a family with strong religious values.

for charity has always been a part of my family, whether it was pancake breakfasts, cooking chickens, building churches or any other endeavors."

That solid set of values also includes a warm approach at the personal level, as well as a strong sense of connection to others.

Both Guilbeau and Knox use exactly the same words: “He never met a stranger.”

“Dom values the opportunities he has had to sit and talk with other company owners and other people in the industry,” Guilbeau says. “I think what means the most to him are the friendships he has developed. They’re not just people you call friends while you’re serving. They’re lifelong friends. He’ll be friends with many people in this industry long after he’s done volunteering with ESA.”

How strongly does D’Ascoli value friendship? “I don’t forget,” he says. “I’m still doing favors for people from 30 years ago. If somebody has helped me out somewhere during my life, I’ll go out of my way.”

Moving forward

D’Ascoli’s presidency brought about a great deal of change at ESA, including creation of a Member Service Center, moving to a new headquarters, and pushing for increased financial stability.

As he prepares to end his two-year term as president, Knox praises D’Ascoli’s commitment to the future, and his work to ensure the greatest value for members.

“As president, his vision was to build a world-class association by delivering exceptional value,” Knox says. “His foresight and leadership ensured our ability to embrace companies that are involved in new technologies and need a place to get involved. His sound business practices positioned ESA to continue to move forward from a strong financial base.”

D’Ascoli still emphasizes the value of membership when he talks about the association and its future.

“Members have to see the value,” he says. “They’re the ones who have to be convinced. I know where we have come from, and our attitude always was that we can’t go backwards. We always felt like we started this, we’re going to get into it, we’re going to get through it, and we’re going to be successful. And we are successful!”



D’Ascoli is the proud patriarch of a large extended family. He set up his business in the scenic Smoky Mountains of North Carolina knowing it would be a great environment for raising children.

Sam Fiske Earns Prestigious Sara E. Jackson Award

This year, there’s a particularly strong bond between the winners of the Morris F. Weinstock Person of the Year award and the Sara E. Jackson Memorial Award. Jackson winner Sam Fiske has worked for Weinstock winner Dom D’Ascoli for the past 17 years at Smoky Mountain Systems in Franklin, N.C.

The Jackson award was officially presented to Fiske in January at ESA Leadership Summit. At ESX, though, the spotlight will fall squarely on D’Ascoli as the Weinstock winner.

Both men acknowledge that as general manager, Fiske is largely the “numbers” guy and provides the perfect balance to D’Ascoli’s hard-charging leadership style.

“I’m an entrepreneur and a gambler, and Sam’s ultraconservative,” D’Ascoli said. “He’s always got both oars in the water

at the same time, and that’s very helpful. He’s worked with me for a lot of years, and he has a work ethic that’s second to none. I wish I had half a dozen more like him.”

In fact, Fiske is currently mentoring D’Ascoli’s eldest son, Mark, to eventually fill the slot as general manager whenever Fiske decides to retire. “Sam’s knowledge of the technical side is limited,” D’Ascoli said, “but he has a very strong overall knowledge of business and human relations.”

The Sara E. Jackson Award, which is sponsored by Honeywell, recognizes an ESA volunteer who has exceptional leadership skills on a committee, task force or board.

Fiske has been chair of the Membership Committee for more than three years,

and has also served on a number of other committees and task forces. He’s always willing to handle anything that might come his way: “I will serve wherever I’m asked to serve by the president.”

