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FEATURE

Passing The Torch: Carole Schumacher Hands Ownership Of Schumacher Camera To James Pope And Mike Acuña

Amy Wilschke



Since the early 1990s, Schumacher Camera has developed a reputation as a leader in film industry equipment maintenance and rental, serving filmmakers across the Midwest and the nation, and even international clients, as well. And the company has every intention on maintaining that reputation – but it will do so under new ownership.

Carole Schumacher has announced that she will be handing over the company's reins to longtime employees Mike Acuña and James Pope. "My decision was really made a few years back and I've been gradually easing back over the last year-and-a-half to two years and letting James and Mike do more," Schumacher says. "They work well as a team and I think they've been [increasingly] ready for the responsibility. They're able to drive the business forward."

Pope, general manager at Schumacher Camera, has been with the company for nine years. He says one skill he picked up from his experience at Schumacher is "doing things the right way." More specifically, Pope says, "Being very detail oriented allow[s] us to provide and grow in the environment that we're in. Commercial production happens so fast now...and because of the [organizational] systems we have in place we're able to adapt to our clients' needs really quickly and customize their camera packages [without letting] things fall through the cracks."

Acuña, Schumacher's service manager, started with Schumacher as an intern and has risen through the ranks to become a 13-year veteran. Acuña says prior to Schumacher he was into video production, "but my heart was in film and filmmaking." He says he adjusted well at Schumacher and learned the ins and outs of the business. Carole Schumacher even provided him with training for Arriflex and other camera equipment manufacturers.

Pope and Acuña will take over Schumacher's operations as co-owners. "Mike and I have been running the company together for a couple years now on a day-to-day basis," says Pope. "Carole has turned over more and more responsibility to us in the last few years, so it's kind of a natural thing for us because we've been doing it for awhile."

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Under the new co-ownership, Pope will be in charge of the business side of the company while Acuña will handle the technical aspect. Pope says he will deal with producers and DPs when ordering equipment and Acuña will be in charge of executing and supervising the orders, making sure all equipment is in working condition and out the door to clients in a timely fashion.

Acuña is also in charge of short- and long-term maintenance of equipment. Pope says, "When we bring [equipment] in we need to make sure [it's] up to our specifications."

Although there is a division of labor between the co-owners, Pope says their job duties are so intertwined because of the nature of the business. "Because of the fluid nature of the jobs, we're constantly in communication," he says. "[When clients] want a certain shot or a certain piece of equipment, [Mike and I] kind of talk to make sure they're getting the best possible option, because a lot of times there are multiple options out there for them."

Pope isn't kidding about options, considering Joseph and Carole Schumacher started their company with three cameras in 1991. One of those cameras, however, was the Arriflex 535 A, a state-of-the-art camera that was introduced to Chicago by Schumacher. The company is also the first rental house to have Cooke lenses, as well as a few other items.

"My decisions on equipment, and many other things, were based on what the needs of the markets were," Carole Schumacher says. "I didn't want to go with what was fashionable or what people thought was trendy. I didn't want to buy those things. They're way too expensive. I wanted to make sure we had a market for those pieces of equipment before we bought [them]."

Schumacher argues that it's best to let the market dictate what it needs and not allow yourself to be swayed by manufacturers. She says this is how other companies have gotten into trouble.

"Other companies have let the manufacturers say, 'Oh, this is going to be really big. Everybody's getting it and you need to have it,'" says Schumacher. "They can't use it in their market because they haven't assessed the market. They've gone with the hype. I let the market tell us what was needed, and then when I felt that [a product] was sufficiently needed, I purchased it."

Strong customer service is another key reason Schumacher Camera has been able to maintain itself as an industry staple for 15 years. "Dealing with all different types of people and personalities...[is one] really important thing that I've learned here," says Pope. "We have clients from all over the world and country, and with each client it's like [we're dealing with] their most important job at that moment, so we try and do our utmost in assuring them that they're going to get what they need for their shoot. It's one less thing that they have to worry about because they have so many other things that they need to deal with."

Schumacher says, "Our focus has always been on helping our clients figure out how best to shoot their jobs and give them the tools they need, and I know [Mike and James] will be carrying that forward as their own mantra because that's the way they practice already."

Schumacher has several personal and professional reasons for handing the company over. "I wanted to bring the company to a level of respect and functioning," she says. "It's time for a younger generation. [James and Mike] will bring a new life to it in a different kind of way, and I think they'll do very well. They're both talented and capable." Schumacher says she feels she is leaving the company in good hands and is ready to enjoy some other experiences herself, such as traveling.

Although she won't be as prominent a figure as in the past, Schumacher will still work as advertising manager for the company and will continue to do some branding and creative work. "We've always worked as a team on these things,

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so I know that if they need me they will call me,” she says. “I’ll support them in any way I can. But I don’t think they’re going to need a whole lot from me. I think we’ve done a long transition here and I think they’re really ready.”

As far as production in Chicago goes, Pope says it’s been pretty healthy, with the two biggest changes being that jobs are bigger and they come down a lot quicker. He says the addition of an infrastructure tax credit could make things even more attractive for local businesses. “The film office has been doing a bang-up job – both the city of Chicago and the Illinois Film Office – as far as getting people educated about the film business that is here,” he says. “Hopefully the politicians will understand and make things a little more attractive so we can compete with other markets.”

While the future of the film industry offers no guarantees, Pope can offer one: “We’re really looking forward to continue on with Schumacher with the same level of service, the maintenance of the gear and the commitment to quality and service that we give our clients. We want to stress the fact that we’ve been implementing this already over a couple years and it’s a seamless transition as far as we’re concerned, [as well as] for our clients.”

Schumacher has the same vision for the new owners. “I would expect them to continue with the basic premise that we have – providing basic camera packages...but to maintain the high level of service...and introduce new gear to the Midwest,” she says. “I also look forward to what they’re going to do in the future, what ideas they’re going to develop...[and]what business and relationships they’re going to develop that are new. They make a good team and I think they have a good drive for success.”

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