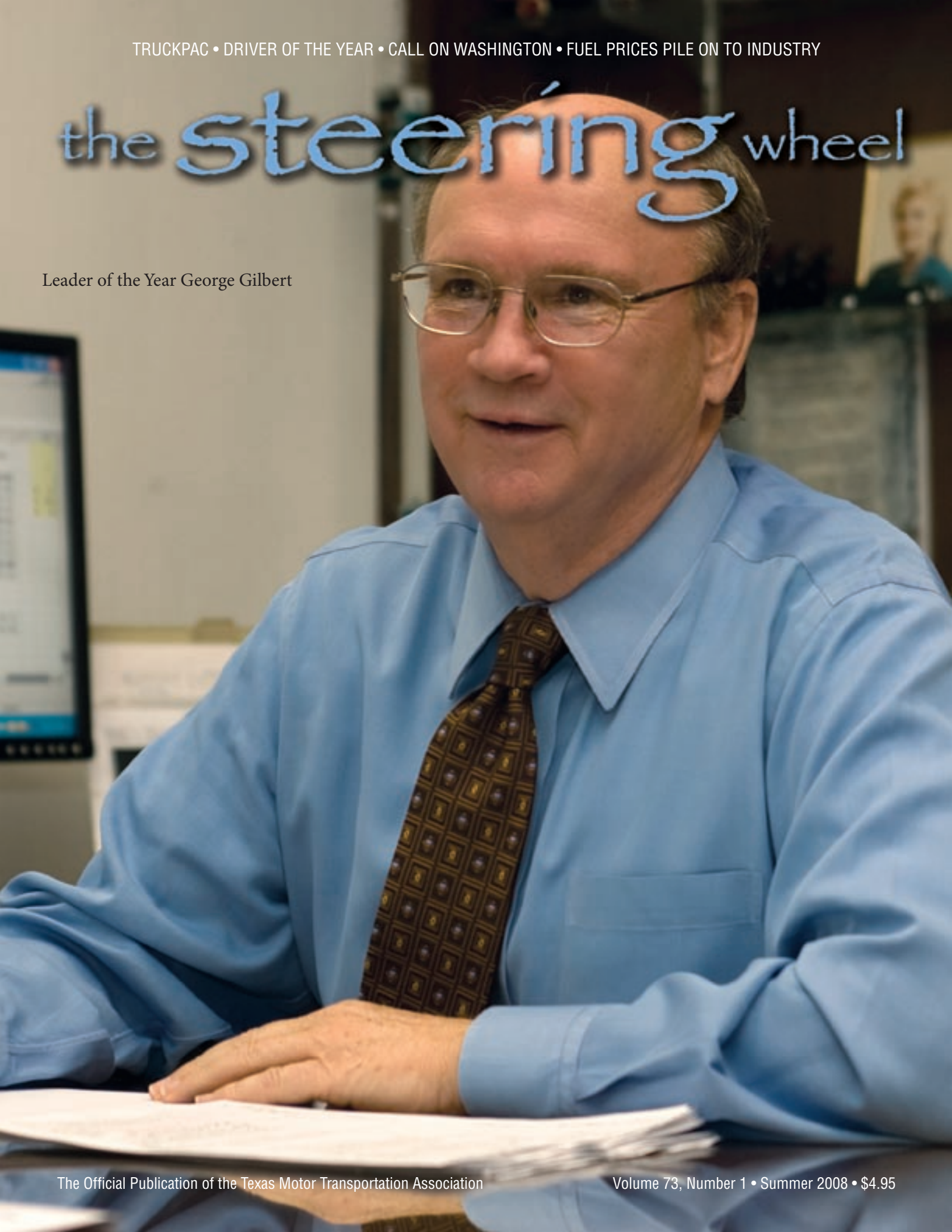


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# the steering wheel

Leader of the Year George Gilbert



**Leader of the Year George Gilbert Has Taken**

# THE LONG WAY HOME



BY STEVE BRAWNER

*Contributing Writer*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON D KENNEDY

It was 1976, and George Gilbert was unemployed.

He and his transportation employer of seven years had parted ways, and it had not been amicable. After spending a month not knowing what to do next with his life, he finally decided to do what he had been doing – work in transporta-

tion – only this time; he would be his own boss and would run his business according to his Christian values. So he laid out a game plan and, with partner Luther Lambright, started EDC Moving Systems to deliver computers – some as heavy as four tons – and other high-value, sensitive equipment to customers in Houston.

The company started working out of a 1,000 square-foot warehouse making deliveries with a pickup truck. Six weeks after opening their doors, he and Lambright bought a \$1,500 bobtail truck using farm tractors they each owned as collateral. During the business's early days, Lambright would drive the bobtail while Gilbert made sales calls in the morning in a suit and then changed into work clothes to drive the pickup that afternoon.

EDC quickly grew under Gilbert's leadership. By January 1978, it had expanded to the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, and two years later, its new San Antonio branch gave it the ability to service almost all of Texas. By 1983, the company was becoming a national player in high-value products distribution, servicing Oklahoma, Louisiana and Arkansas. Within 10 years, it had \$23 million in sales, and eventually it had 23 locations across the country.

Twenty-three locations was a long way from a single pickup truck, just as the top of the transportation industry was a long way from where Gilbert had started. He was born in a house in Rodessa, Louisiana. His father was an alcoholic who abused his wife and who died in a car crash shortly after relatives took the family away from him when Gilbert was two months old. Gilbert spent his childhood in the piney woods of East Texas, where his mother, Sylvia, took the family first to a Nazarene church and then to a Baptist church. The family had to walk to the Nazarene Church, the Baptist Church offered free transportation. He attended his first eight grades in a country

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...HE ENROLLED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON BUT WAS DRAFTED AND SENT TO VIETNAM, WHERE HE BECAME A SERGEANT, SERVED AS A WRITER/PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE STARS & STRIPES NEWSPAPER, AND SURVIVED TWO HELICOPTER CRASHES.

school with only three classrooms.

Sylvia raised the family without any government help by selling produce and eggs from a five-acre farm. After working all day growing fruits and vegetables, she would escape after supper to her rose garden, where she would dispense pearls of wisdom to her son. Totally at peace with the world, her situation, and with God, she once asked, "George, do you hear that corn growing?"

Gilbert learned to work and help in the produce garden at an early age. He vividly remembers the feeling of satisfaction the day a Piggly Wiggly representative counted out \$200 in 10 \$20 bills for part of a bumper crop of tomatoes. He mowed one neighbor's yard 12 times for two pigs, took

the picks of the litter, and raised them until they were big enough to slaughter and eat. Meanwhile, he mowed a widow's yard for a glass of iced tea and a piece of pie because that was what she could afford to pay him.

When he was 15, Sylvia, the most inspirational person in his life, died suddenly and unexpectedly in the hospital, which left him living with his aunt and uncle in Brackettville. Refusing to be defeated, he and his sisters each left a grain of corn in Sylvia's casket at the funeral. "The symbolism was that we were not going to just roll over and die because our mother had died," he said. "We were going to go on and be productive in our lives and make her proud of us."

And she would be. After two years of

junior college, he enrolled in the University of Houston but was drafted and sent to Vietnam, where he became a sergeant, served as a writer/photographer for the Stars & Stripes newspaper, and survived two helicopter crashes. He returned home, went to work, and started a business that now occupies more than 400,000 square feet of warehouse space, operates a fleet of more than 100 trucks, and has about 155 employees – but he never forgot the values his mother taught him.

The company focuses on four businesses: delivering high-value products to homes; office and industrial relocation; moving people as an agent for Bekins Van Lines, of which Gilbert is chairman of the board and the largest shareholder



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(Gilbert helped organize a group of agents to buy Bekins Van Lines in 2002); and warehousing and asset management. But it's not as spread out as it used to be. Tired of traveling the country, Gilbert sold or closed all but four terminals – in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Austin.

The narrower focus has allowed him to concentrate less on growing the company and more on creating an ongoing culture of excellence. "We like to call it 'high-performance culture,' because we try to hire the best people and we expect them to be all they can be all the time," he said. "If you encourage your people, give them the opportunity to be all they can be, and you give them training to help them grow, the best people will excel."

For Gilbert, who is a former TMTA chairman, those people are the key to his success. His four terminal managers each have been with the company more than two decades, and while Gilbert gives them a lot of credit, his other 150 employees are important in their own ways. He believes that for EDC to succeed, its employees

need to succeed personally, so the company works with their employees to help them set and reach their own goals.

"You have to hire people who have ambition, who have a vision to be bigger and better than perhaps the job that you're offering them," he said. "I'm not going to say anybody can drive a truck, but you can train a lot of people to drive a truck. But for that person to have the skills to deal with the customers and really wow the customer with service – you must put them through a lot of training, and training is an essential part of any business – but ultimately the person has to have a vision to be better, and to accomplish more."

Although the company tries to hire goal-directed employees, those goals don't have to involve moving up the corporate ladder. Employees who make it their mission to excel in the job that they have are just as valued. EDC has some driver helpers who have been with the company 15 years and have no desire to get behind the wheel, but they are always eager to train new drivers. Workers like that are hard to

find, so instead of promoting them into positions that don't suit them, simply so he can justify paying them more money, Gilbert rewards them where they are.

According to Gilbert, the company hires few hourly drivers because those employees can only make more money by working more hours, not working smarter for themselves and the company. Instead, the company rewards outstanding work with recognition and with financial incentives. In addition to paying employees based on the company's success, employees who do outstanding work immediately receive gift cards to retailers and restaurants. "People want to be recognized for doing a good job, but sometimes just a pat on the back's not enough," he said. "They like to get a little money for it."

Each year, the company has a much-anticipated employee meeting, complete with speakers, service honors, tenure honors and other special forms of recognition. Drivers receive \$50 bills for each safe year of service, with the amount

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counted out in front of coworkers. (One driver had reached \$1100 for 22 safe years until he unfortunately received a traffic violation.) Five years of safe driving earns a driver a leather jacket and admission into the company's Safe Driving Club, where veteran members welcome inductees on stage to their fraternity. Outstanding employees receive the company's Commitment to Excellence Award.

Gilbert says the leadership qualities that made him and his company successful have their roots from his mother and his grade school experience; however, he has further developed them through study and research. Gilbert is honest and genuine with his employees, setting the example by submitting to random drug testing as often as they do. He encourages his employees to dream because he says dreams are the first step to setting goals and creating benchmarks to reach those goals. "If you really care about the people in your office, your branch, and you set the bar for them to do more and be all they can be, they will respect you for that


and you will accomplish more," he said.

As important as EDC is, it's only one facet of Gilbert's life. More important are his family and his faith. He and his wife, Robin, have two sons: Cory, 30, who gave his parents their first grandchild; and Carter, 27, who works for the EDC Austin branch and is learning the family business. Active in Houston's First Baptist Church, Gilbert has traveled the world on mission trips – including to Romania shortly after its communist dictator was assassinated; to India twice, where he led a 30-person medical team; to the Ukraine twice; to New Zealand and to Russia in 1991, where he taught seminars to budding new capitalists including one that drew 1,000 participants. "God has really been good to me," he said. "I've really been blessed in my life."

TMTA President John Esparza commented that "George is one of those extraordinary people you meet in life who leads by his actions - true leadership, not the talked about kind. Getting to know George, it is clear he draws his strength from his family and his faith, and

in my book there is nothing stronger."

Gilbert's favorite hobby is his 400-piece collection of American brilliant cut glass, a detailed style of cut glass made popular from about 1890 to about 1910. His office is decorated with beautiful whiskey decanters, rum jugs, ashtrays, and other items that the nonsmoking, non-drinking Baptist jokingly calls his "sin collection." When his term as chairman of TMTA ended in 2005, he was given an American Brilliant 15 inch Glass Champagne Pitcher that was cut by J. Hawkes in 1905.

An orphan at age 15, a combat Vietnam veteran at age 25, and unemployed at age 32, Gilbert knows his experiences could have led him down a different path. Instead he became a successful business owner and father with two wonderful families – the one at home, and the one at work. Why? Because he chose to be. "You can't be a defeatist," he said. "You have to have a dream, a vision that says, 'Hey, I want more, I want to be more. I want to do more in life.' And you know, you can't just dream it, you've got to put it in action." 

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