

A Very Fond Farewell to Gerry Kane



AFTER 47 YEARS, AIST'S
LONGEST-TENURED STAFFER,
AND ITS MOST WELL-KNOWN,
IS RETIRING

In all the front offices of all the companies in all the steel industry, there is one name that is more well-known, and thought more well of, than any other: Gerry Kane.

In her more than 47 years with AIST and its predecessor, Gerry Kane has called upon more customers, shaken more hands, sold more advertising, and had more fun doing it, than anyone else can ever claim to.

“What can I say? I love people. And I love talking to people,” says Gerry, who, as we announced in March, has decided to retire. Her last day is in June, making AISTech 2017 in Nashville her last “official” conference and exposition.

We knew this day would come — she has been promising to retire for the past 10 years. But we never believed her. And Gerry herself never really believed it. Nevertheless, she is following through this time. And AIST will be all the smaller for it.





To my AIST family, wonderful industry colleagues, advertisers, exhibitors and dear friends,

As we draw closer to another AISTech, I find it increasingly difficult to believe that my more than 47 years with AIST and its predecessor, AISE, have gone by so quickly. It's all the more difficult to believe that this year's conference and exposition in Nashville will be my last — I will be retiring on 1 June.

Words cannot express my heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you for helping to create all of the great memories and lasting relationships. I will cherish them always. I have gotten to know thousands of you through the years, and I am privileged to

have worked with such wonderful people every day.

The support you have provided to both this organization and its mission and the friendship you have extended to me is tremendous. AIST and all of you have been nothing but good to me, beginning from the moment I arrived for my job interview all those years ago wearing my white gloves and pillbox hat.

I was hired as a receptionist and was fortunate to become the manager of exhibits and advertising. Through it all, there were some long hours of work and countless miles of travel, but the great people who, both past and present, have worked hard and cared about the organization and its members made it all worthwhile.

There are too many to name them all, but two people in particular who made a lasting impact are Bill Albaugh and Sam Seem, each of whom has taught me so much and has become a lifelong friend.

I've worked for four executive directors — William Friesel, who hired me; followed by Hershel Poole; Larry Maloney; and Ron Ashburn — all great leaders. I would like to extend a special thank-you to Ron, who will go down in my book as one of the best. He genuinely looks out for his staff and steered us in a new direction when the time came for AIST's predecessor organizations to merge into one.

Now it's my turn to say so long, but not goodbye. I have had so many things on the backburner and I'm looking forward to getting to them; yet I'm sure it will take me a while to adjust to my new schedule, and to not having regular contact with all of you.

It is true that when you spend so much of your time at work, customers and co-workers become friends and are considered family. I have sincerely treasured the friendships and relationships that I've made with all of you.

There's a saying: "It's good when you find it difficult to say goodbye to someone, because it only means that you have found a true friend." That's how I feel about all of you, my AIST family, and I truly hope that's how you'll think of and remember me!

With heartfelt gratitude and appreciation,



"AIST and Gerry Kane are synonymous; it's hard to imagine one without the other," said AIST executive director Ron Ashburn. "Our mission is technical in nature, but we fulfill it by fostering relationships and building networks. And in this regard, Gerry is our champion," he added.

"Over the years, she has become an icon of customer service to the industry and the reason for our success with advertising and expositions. She has been our secret weapon for almost a half-century, and we will miss her dearly."

Gerry joined the association in 1969, which was then the Association of Iron and Steel Engineers.

With a daughter at home, a diploma from an eight-month business school, and a need to work, Gerry one day put on a pillbox hat and her white gloves and walked into the association's office to fill out a job application. The association was looking for a receptionist, and Gerry Kane, then 26, was looking to earn \$350 a week.

She won the job. Less than a year into it, however, she was moved to inside sales, and eventually, outside sales.

Gerry Kane





She still remembers her first solo sales call. Too afraid at the time to meet a stranger, she called upon a customer whom she already knew, Shoun Kerbaugh. She picked him up in her station wagon and took him to a Chinese restaurant. Mostly because it was inexpensive. The tab came to \$7.

“I was afraid to spend more.”

As it would turn out, though, that one call was all it took for Gerry to overcome whatever reservations she had at the time.

“After that, it was easy,” she said. “And my expenses kept going up, too!”

And so did her cachet in the industry.

In fact, Gerry Kane is the only staffer to have ever attained one-name celebrity status. Like Cher. Or Prince. Or Beyoncé. GerryKane. All run together. It sounds like hurricane.

And, Lord, she is a force to be reckoned with.

One time, she took a new hire out on a sales call, and before they walked into the office they were visiting, Gerry scribbled a note on a pad. The note listed the size and the frequency of the advertisement she was about to sell.

When they sat down with the customer, Gerry said, “Here’s what you’re going to do.”

The customer thought about it for a moment, and said, “OK.” They then spent the next 45 minutes talking about everything except business.

And that was the thing about a Gerry Kane sales call. It was never so much a sales call as it was a social engagement. Sure, there may have been a bit of small talk about marketing plans and budgets and strategic communication goals, but those conversations were dispensed with quickly in favor of talk about families and mutual industry colleagues and perhaps even a few off-color jokes.

Much of her style is largely attributable to her former boss, Sam Seem, now retired.

As he explains it, selling advertising is a numbers game. Advertisers want to know how much it will cost to print an ad in a given number of copies, and how many people are likely to see those copies. And back in the day, he says, the Association of Iron and Steel Engineers’ “numbers” weren’t as attractive as those from the competition.

So to overcome that, the strategy was to befriend the marketeers and to position the association as a provider of solutions to whatever problems they may have had. To



do that, it was critical to chat up the customers and get to know them, the products they were trying to sell and the challenges they faced.

One of his strategies was to always have something on hand unrelated to business that he could discuss. It was that approach upon which Gerry modeled her own. She learned from Seem, she said, by studying the letters he'd send to customers and listening to how he spoke with them.

That having been said, most of it comes naturally to Gerry.

She is, after all, quick with a smile, a joke and a story. And she knows how to have fun. Indeed, there's never a dull moment hanging with Gerry Kane.

Once, while vacationing with some friends in the Caribbean, she happened to see legendary country singer Johnny Cash sitting at a table. Gerry called out to him, "Hey Johnny, where's June?"

"Well, she's upstairs taking a nap," he replied.

"Mind if I come over and get a picture?"

"Sure," he said.

Before he could croon "love is a burning thing," she promptly positioned herself on Johnny's lap and the rest was history.

It's hard to tell who was happier for the company in the photo. But that's Gerry Kane. People just can't say no to her!

Gerry Kane's last day will be 1 June 2017, and since announcing in March, she has received more than 100 emails, most expressing disbelief that she's moving on. And then there have been the phone calls, too.

She took one at home the other day and teared up during the conversation. But she won't admit to it, if you ask.

"I never let 'em see me sweat," she said. ♦

A note to Gerry:

On behalf of the AIST staff, both present and past, and all AIST members everywhere, we wish you the very best in your retirement. Your youthful enthusiasm and can-do attitude embody the true spirit of this organization, and throughout your career, you have shown us what it means to exceed expectations. Your contributions to AIST and your service to its members will not be forgotten.

— Ron Ashburn
AIST Executive Director

