

Profile of Mike Lapeyrouse

President and CEO of The American Equity Underwriters, Inc. (AEU)

YOU MIGHT IMAGINE that a man of coastal Mobile, Alabama whose business is maritime insurance would favor the water. But with his feet solidly on the ground, Mike Lapeyrouse prefers time inland where hunting is his favorite pastime. In fact Mike invites friends and clients to hoist a shotgun and tramp along with him into the woods.

This up-close-and-personal style lies at the heart of his company's success. Relating closely with customers, getting to know their individual needs, and always being accessible permeate the culture of The American Equity Underwriters, Inc. (AEU). Yet so do competitive determination and a disciplined focus on reducing risk. Which leads to the next unexpected fact about Mike Lapeyrouse: he began his career as a lawyer, learning the art of analyzing the facts before him.



While he didn't practice law for long, that first career brought him on board as in-house counsel with AEU's predecessor, Cooper/T. Smith. There he became "the safety man," mastering the law put forth in the Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation Act (USL&H) and digging into all aspects of industry regulations and loss control. With this expertise, he migrated into claims with the company and, in essence, "was fortunate to learn the insur-

ance business by not being in the insurance business."

Lapeyrouse recalls, "In this period during the '80's the industry environment was forcing companies to focus on safety and quality control. As a captive insurer, we didn't have the usual constraints of the typical insurance company, and we were free to be innovative. Eventually, we developed a reputation as experts in the longshore arena, and others started turning to us to freelance their coverage. Ultimately, this led to the creation of AEU."

Their experience with innovation and risk management provided the perfect platform for AEU, which has built one of the most respected maritime loss control programs in the industry. These elements run deep through the company's DNA, intertwined with Lapeyrouse's insistence on no-holds-barred service. His 50+ employees know they're expected to be incredibly responsive in handling and overseeing claims as Lapeyrouse once did. He says, "Everyone who works here must read *Raving Fans*, which is all about the importance of exceeding customers' expectations. You have to wow your customers. It's absolutely essential to differentiate ourselves in that way."

As they strive to perpetually raise the bar on customer service, AEU's employees enjoy a strong sense of camaraderie throughout



the organization. Lapeyrouse "gets to know everyone," says a colleague who also reports that he regularly brings in breakfast for the troops. Company-sponsored charities such as Boys & Girls Club and Big Brothers Big Sisters provide additional opportunities for coming together.

Keeping this close-knit spirit is essential to Lapeyrouse even as he acknowledges "it's a whole new day" now that AEU is part of AmWINS Group, Inc., which acquired AEU in June of 2007. Lapeyrouse adds, "Fortunately, AmWINS hasn't changed the way we operate, recognizing our expertise in what we do. But with their resources behind us, we've just started a wholesale division, and we're looking forward to providing even more unique marine coverages." With these expanded offerings, it sounds like AEU's customers have a lot to look forward to as well.