

## NEWS

# The neighborhood locksmith faces puzzling challenge as tumblers give way to electronics

*Mark Reed learned long ago how to reinvent himself when business got tough.*

**Andrew Kulp** Lebanon Daily News

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## Story Highlights

You won't believe what he had to do to learn the craft through a mail-order class.

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We tend to think of a locksmith as the guy who cuts a key or shows up to open your door when you lock yourself out. Maybe that was the case in 1979, when Mark Reed paid around \$250 to take a correspondence course to learn the trade.

In 2019, with the advent of smart locks and rise of home surveillance, locksmithing is at times unrecognizable from its origins and changing rapidly. Yet, 40 years after Mark started his business out of an attached home garage, Reed's Lock & Access Control Systems in Annville is on the industry's cutting edge.

"Probably 70 percent or maybe even higher of what we do is in the electronics world in some way, shape or form," says Jill Reed, Mark's wife and office manager for Reed's Lock.

## What does a locksmith do in 2019?

When you step inside Reed's Lock, you're immediately greeted by yourself, on a big-screen television. The screen shows multiple angles of the building, inside and out, a demonstration of the surveillance capabilities.

The back wall behind the counter is adorned with key blanks -- proof that traditional locksmithing is still at work here. Roughly half the sales floor is lined with all size and

manner of safes, or strongboxes, while much of the rest is dedicated to the latest technology in home security.

The job isn't just locks and keys anymore.

“At least once a week someone will come in to have a key made and they'll say, ‘Oh, I didn't know you have all these safes,’ or, ‘You do cameras,’ or fill in the blank,” Jill said.

“It's very difficult to convey in a brief way what all we do. It's pretty broad spectrum.”

There are still traditional locksmiths who work only with old school mechanical locks, and there are companies that are strictly in the electronics side of home security. Reed's Lock married the two to stay ahead of the curve.

## **“We just might starve”**

Mark worked for his grandfather's construction company during high school and his early married years to Jill, but the 1970s recession hit builders hard. So, with his career up in the air and a family to feed, he did what many people do and went back to school – in a sense.

There weren't any online universities at the time. Perhaps the closest equivalent was education by mail.

“He actually came home from work one day with the back of a magazine,” said Jill. “You could do any number of occupational pursuits (by mail), and it would be ‘Learn to be a’ whatever.

“It said, ‘Learn to be a locksmith.’ He said, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘We just might starve.’ It was a scary venture having two very little children at the time.”

Now, a person would likely need to land an apprenticeship or some type of on-the-job training to become a locksmith, maybe have a father or grandfather in the business. Mark's career path is virtually unrepeatable.

“Your first lesson came in an envelope with a cloth bag attached to it, and in the cloth bag was a file, a couple key blanks and step-by-step instructions to produce a key,” said Jill. “Send it back, and if you pass that, they send you the next lesson, and it just built on that for the course of maybe a year-and-a-half.

“That would be unheard of today.”

## **The smart lock revolution**

Nobody at the time could've envisioned where the industry was headed, either. Only years later would General Motors release the '85 Corvette, the first automobile with a transponder key, or chip key as people often refer to it. Now, almost every car has wireless entry.

Reed's Lock didn't jump on the bandwagon immediately, but sometime during the '90s, the role technology would play in the business became obvious.

“It's an industry where very, very much if you don't evolve with it, you're going to be in the dust,” said Jill. “That's just the reality of it.”

Chip keys were merely a gateway into what was to come. The prevalence of alarm systems and camera surveillance followed, and in just the last couple years, the popularity of smart locks for homes has exploded.

Smart locks can take many forms, all of which you've no doubt seen in a TV commercial if not in real life. Some require a numbered code for access. Others can double as a camera. They can work hand in hand with the other technology in your home, from the lights to the thermostat.

“Some of it's the cool factor,” said Jill. “Some of it's the trend. Some of it's what all the neighbors have, ergo, ‘I need one too.’”

“Some rightfully want to make sure they see their kids come home from school when they're at work or need to be able to turn up the thermostat or watch mom or if they have an elderly loved one at home. There's as many reasons as there probably are products on the market.”

## **Are smart locks safe?**

Exactly how secure all this technology is has become a topic of discussion as these products are rolled out. There's some reason for skepticism, though generally speaking, smart locks can be as much about practicality as security.

“Truthfully, it's hard to beat a decent deadbolt as far as entry into your home,” said Jill.

“But it is nice for what used to be called latchkey kids or people who want to just close the door, go for a run or bike ride and not have to worry about keys.

“Many things are keyless anymore. From that standpoint, it is a nice feature. Many of them are very secure, but I would not go so far as to say it’s the be-all and end-all as far as security is concerned.”

For one, a lot more goes into keeping intruders out of your home than a lock.

“You can put a \$1000 lock on a flimsy door and you might as well have thrown your money down the toilet, because it’s not only about the lock you put on it,” said Jill.

“There’s a whole lot more than goes into the security of a door than the lock.”

Reed’s Lock does no-obligation visits to customers’ homes – often in the building stage – to assess their security needs. Only then can Mark and his team determine what makes the most sense.

“The pros and cons (of smart locks) sometimes meet somewhere in the middle depending on the need of that person or business and what they want,” said Jill. “What you want may not be what I want.

“What features are you looking for? What color do you want it to be? How do you want it to operate? What are your needs?”

## **Reed’s Lock expands**

After starting as a side hustle in 1979, Mark went full-time into locksmithing. He and Jill – both Lebanon natives – eventually moved into a bigger house with a detached garage for the business. In the mid-'80s, Jill went full-time with Reed’s Lock, too.

One day, Mark was driving one of the signature red Reed’s Lock vans back from a job when he saw a building for sale along Route 422. They went to look at 700 E. Main St that same night.

“He said, ‘What do you think,’” said Jill. “I said, ‘I can’t believe you didn’t make him an offer already.’ We knew.”

In 2000, Reed’s Lock moved into the former Encore Boutique, a defunct bridal shop. Mark’s construction background came in handy, as he and Jill gutted and renovated the

building from the ground up.

Expansion didn't stop there. Right around the same time Reed's Lock was celebrating 40 years in business, Mark and Jill acquired another locksmithing business based out of Harrisburg.

"It was not a decision taken lightly, absorbing a whole other customer base and expanding your footprint," said Jill. "It takes time and effort and a few hairs pulled."

Based in tiny Annville, and a part of Lebanon since inception, the footprint for Reed's Lock now extends into the four surrounding counties – Berks, Dauphin, Lancaster and Schuylkill – and beyond. There have been jobs as far west as Erie and as far east as Long Island, New York.

## **What's next for Reed's Lock and locksmithing?**

Currently, there are no signs of slowing down. With an estimated 70 percent of its clientele commercially contracted, and a finger on the pulse of the industry, Reed's Lock is built to lead the way wherever the business is headed.

"Mark's father just retired last year at the age of 80," said Jill. "I have informed him I don't plan to be here until I'm 80."

"The 'R' word gets bandied about from time to time. We don't have any immediate plans. We like what we do. He's worked hard at it, he's good at it. Why retire and do something you don't enjoy as much?"

As for home security, the technological advances are still in their infancy, especially as it pertains to smart locks.

In our more immediate future, video doorbells appear to be the next big thing, but before too long, it might feel a bit like James Bond slinking around when you're simply opening your front door.

"I think it'll be a while until it reaches us, but biometrics will play a more important role," said Jill, referring to technology driven by artificial intelligence, such as facial recognition.

"There are already fingerprint safes out there."

At the speed technology moves, all anybody can say for certain is the days where a person

can learn to be a locksmith with nothing more than \$250 and a mailbox are long gone.