

# Tribune Chronicle

## Raising the Roof

Boardman native guides hotels through pandemic

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BOARDMAN — A sign hung above the threshold of the Limbert family home's rear door read, *"If there is no wind, ROW."*

That saying sums up George Limbert's assessment of the people of northeast Ohio and the Mahoning Valley, known for their grit and stick-to-it-iveness, and it's the mantra he's applied during some of the most difficult times of his life and career.

For his career in the hotel industry, there was no more difficult time than the pandemic.

*"I was thrust into the role of the leader of the crisis management team. We worked day and night and made decisions by the second,"* said Limbert. *"We had to pivot our business at a moment's notice."*

New Albany-based Red Roof performed well during the pandemic, due in no small part to Limbert's leadership.

So when he told his father the chain succeeded during the outbreak and was considering him for president, the older Limbert's response was *"of course you thrived during the pandemic, you are from Youngstown,"* Limbert said.

*“He was absolutely right about that. There’s a kind of resilience of people from Youngstown. And growing up in a community like that, with those values and with the experience of an ethnic family of immigrants has not only helped prepare me for this role, it makes me comfortable in it,”* Limbert said.

*“Our guests are the people I grew up with. They’re out working and figuring out what is next in their lives and for their families. I’m so fortunate to have had the chance to grow up where I did, surrounded, as I was, by people for whom hard work was as normal as taking a breath.”*

Red Roof’s board of directors in August named Limbert, a member of the Boardman High School Class of 1999, president of the company that represents four brands with more than 660 locations in 40-plus states in the U.S.

## FAMILY AS A GUIDE

Coming from a Greek immigrant family, Limbert said education was one of the most important things to his family and heritage.

His father, George, is a lawyer and retired federal judge in Youngstown; his mother, Pamela, a master’s degree-educated English teacher at Boardman High School who some say was the hardest teacher at the school; a brother and a sister are both attorneys and another sister is an architect with a master’s degree in industrial design.

Limbert earned a bachelor’s degree in business with a focus on accounting at The Ohio State University and his law degree from the University of Dayton.

*“My father always encouraged me to get an undergraduate degree that was a trade. He wanted all of his children to leave undergraduate school with some sort of discernible skill,”* Limbert said. *“In law school I focused on all business courses, as I always*

*thought corporate business law would be a part of my practice. I also was interested in forming businesses and real estate development.”*

His fondness for business stemmed from his maternal grandfather, who was an entrepreneur, real estate investor and hotel owner.

*“As a child, I would go with him to his various businesses. I always thought I wanted to do something similar. As a young attorney starting my career, I had the honor of living with him toward the end of his life when he was in his 90s. He was sharp as a whip. The opportunity provided me the best business mentor in the history of business mentors,”* Limbert said. *“He taught me so much about business, about picking good partners and about dealing with difficult circumstances.”*

Limbert said he also leaned on his father, whom Limbert credits with having exceptional business acumen, for advice and guidance in his legal career.

The older Limbert imparted on his son if he was going to have business clients, he needed to visit the factory to learn how their products were made. Doing so would allow him to better represent the business, the older Limbert reasoned.

*“I carried that through to Red Roof. When I started as their attorney, I got involved in every aspect of the business. I learned how the business operates and the details that make it work,”* Limbert said. *“I spend time in our inns so that I can stay close to hotel operators and their staff. I talk with guests. I am convinced that having a deeper understanding of our business has been the thing that propelled me into this role as president of Red Roof.”*

## RED ROOF YEARS

Limbert joined Red Roof in 2013 as corporate counsel and became general counsel in 2017. Tapped as interim president in October 2020, the interim tag was removed in August.

Red Roof was founded in 1973 with the opening of the first Red Roof Inn in Columbus. It has grown into four brands: Red Roof, the master brand; Red Roof PLUS+; HomeTowne Studios by Red Roof; and the Red Collection, a brand designed for city center locations that want to affiliate with a brand but maintain their identity.

HomeTowne Studios for extended stays launched in 2018. The new construction prototype was unveiled in August. It's designed, Limbert said, to operate more efficiently due in large part to the labor shortage.

*"The HomeTowne Studios portfolio during COVID outperformed their competitors by 20 points. They did exceptional during this period of time,"* Limbert said. *"That is also part and parcel of people needing to hunker down during COVID and those kinds of things."*

It was during the outbreak Red Roof pivoted its business. When other hotels were closing, Red Roof was opening to doctors, nurses and other essential workers who didn't want to go home and risk infecting their families with the virus. It was when the virus was new and still had a lot of unknowns surrounding it.

*"I remember getting a letter from a nurse who said thank you for the first responders' rate you provided us because I have a child who has asthma and in the early days of COVID, nobody knew, does it stay on your clothes, does it stay on your packages, so she didn't want to go home,"* Limbert said. *"So she stayed at our hotel."*

*"We had doctors who were renting our hotel rooms just to take a shower because they didn't want to bring COVID home."*

## PERFORMANCE

*"We started out-performing our 2019 performance, our pre-COVID performance, starting in April of this year. We are hopeful and expect that trend to continue. What we saw this summer is, we saw pent-up demand of leisure travel. The road warrior came back. People rediscovered America. They went to national parks, they went to places they could travel to via car and that is the sweet spot for*

*Red Roof and we expect that pent-up demand to happen again this summer,”* Limbert said.

Red Roof has 667 properties. All of them have franchise agreements, but affiliates of Red Roof manage a portfolio of about 100 Red Roof Inns and HomeTowne Studios by Red Roof properties.

The brand expanded internationally in 2015 with hotels in Japan and Brazil. Future growth, Limbert said, will be mostly domestic and with HomeTowne Studios by Red Roof.

*“We think extended stay is the future of franchising, and we expect to do that through franchisees who are building our new prototype,”* Limbert said. *“That is our No. 1 lever.”*

The second lever is continued growth in the core Red Roof Inn brand.

But the future isn't without its challenges. At the top of the list is the labor shortage, only accelerated by the viral outbreak.

*“Rethinking how we operate our hotels as an industry is going to be on the forefront of our minds, and that is already at all of the conferences, already is what we have been discussing,”* Limbert said. *“What we have been trying to figure out is how can we run our hotels more efficiently, which makes the timing of the new prototype, the new HomeTowne Studios prototype, perfect.”*