

VASA ANNIVERSARY SPEECH

JUNE 2013

VASA members, honoured guests. Tonight, give or take a few months, VASA celebrates its 20th birthday.

Try to imagine the scene. In the very rooms in which you attended training sessions over the past two days, in 1993, 100 air conditioning specialists from around Australia pledged to form a network which was part lobbyist, part trainer, and part watchdog.

It was one of those moments in history, when this group of people, connected only through ordering parts and sharing the occasional story, decided it was time to rise up and protect their industry and their profitability.

Do you remember what the car world was like in the early 1990s?

It doesn't seem that long ago, but as we are all very well aware, 20 years in the evolution of the motor vehicle is about the equivalent of three or four human generations.

Back in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s the refrigerant R12 Freon was doing its job well in the early climate control systems of those cars lucky enough to have air conditioning installed.

Remember that the mass installation of air conditioning at the factory was still a few years off, so in this part of the world, Australia and New Zealand, probably up to 75 per cent of air conditioning in vehicles on the road in the 1980s and 1990s had been installed by aftermarket workshops which specialised in this work.

And they were good at it. Australian workshops had to be inventive because vehicles came here from around the world. The aftermarket aircon specialists became recognised as the only ones who could figure out and fashion an under dash installation for any make of vehicle. These people were truly craftsmen.

And it was these workshops, about 100 of them, which rallied to a call by a handful of industry leaders in 1993 to form the Vehicle Air Conditioning Specialists of Australia, VASA. New Zealand was added a few years later, to make it the Vehicle Air Conditioning Specialists of Australasia. The organisation was widened a few years ago to incorporate auto electricians and cooling technicians.

There was a very unsubtle barb in the name. The word ‘specialists’ was considered essential in the name, to separate the good guys from the backyard mob who knew little about air conditioning but thought it could be a good money spinner. As soon as R134a appeared, everyone with a spanner in their hand were gradually leading the country into a regime of multiple refrigerants, contamination and repair chaos.

These were some of the issues on the minds of the handful of men who reasoned that the time was right for an industry body to attack issues like poor work practices, contamination of the growing Australasian fleet and the dreaded disposable cylinders.

R134a was around the corner and the workshops smelt the hot breath of overzealous government departments that were looking for ways to make an easy tax buck out of a burgeoning new industry.

Refrigerant top-ups were out of control – any refrigerant that is. As VASA Legend and one of the founders Mark Mitchell recalls, “Work practices were disgusting.

Customers were being ripped off because unskilled workshops and garages knew so little about air conditioning systems that they just kept replacing expensive parts, hoping the problems would go away. Very few people could properly diagnose a system.”

This incredibly high level of expertise, in the hands of so few specialists, has generated its share of criticism over the years. How could VASA claim, they said, that it is the only organisation representing the mobile air conditioning aftermarket sector.

Some argued that VASA could never generate more than 300 members at its peak, so how could it claim to represent the thousands of technicians who were reputedly capable of working on air conditioning systems.

The short answer is that nobody else in the country had the guts to put up their hands and do the job – but there was, and still is, a more realistic answer.

At one stage, our early leaders used to boast that 80 per cent of the real air conditioning diagnostics in this country was being done by only 20 per cent of the technicians – and they were the VASA members.

It could be argued that that ratio has not changed. We are in an age of fixing by replacing. Diagnostics – in other words – an ability to figure out why something goes wrong, is a skill which is still in the hands of the few.

That meeting, in this hotel in 1993, attracted one hundred people from around the nation.

And it wasn't just the workshops that responded.

Some leading wholesalers and manufacturers turned up, and by doing so, helped fashion a unique industry body in which all sectors of the industry could be represented.

The wholesalers instinctively knew that they had a vested interest in a professional industry group and they were prepared to throw their full resources and funding behind it.

The first meeting at the Marriott was a stirring affair. They were as one in their view that the industry needed a big shake-up, and they shared a perception that government intervention in matters like licensing, industry control, and phase out of R12 were very real threats.

They wanted the vehicle air conditioning industry to have a champion, to take its concerns to government at the highest level and ensure that the industry's needs and aspirations were fully understood by the lawmakers, especially if licensing were to materialise – which it did some years later.

VASA was formed by unanimous vote, and it became, and indeed remains, probably one of the most powerful organisations for its size in the automotive sector.

VASA's Certificate of Registration as a company was issued on 21 March 1994.

The first directors were Mark Mitchell (Gold Coast), Ralph Cadman (Sydney), Glen Watkinson (Adelaide), John Blanchard (Melbourne) and Paul Robinson (Perth).

These men, and those who supported them and did more than their share of the work to keep a national organisation alive and relevant are the people we are honouring tonight.

We all owe it to these people who had the vision, the enthusiasm and the welfare of their fellow specialists at heart to keep up the good fight.

It could be argued that the industry needs VASA much more now, than it did back then. Some of the issues remain the same, some are new.

It's also true that it is getting harder to attract people to join any organisation or network, but we can't let this slow down our mission.

Everyone in this room has a vested interest in keeping VASA well and truly alive.

Let us all renew the pledge which was made in these rooms 20 years ago, which were:

1. To raise technical and consumer service standards within the aftermarket vehicle maintenance and repair industry and to promote the benefits of professional aftermarket air conditioning, electrical and associated trades, to the public.
2. To institute and promote a code of ethics for the industry.
3. To encourage training and education of industry personnel.
4. And to liaise with Government and regulatory bodies to ensure a constant exchange of information and to assist appropriate Government departments with advice on industry matters.

I ask everyone present to affirm this pledge by standing, raising your glass and drinking a toast to our founders, and to our future.

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