



# And the Winner Is...

The National Hardware Show® Awards Idaho Store \$100K Through the First Reimagine Retail Program

**W**hat would you do with \$100,000 to improve your business?

Perhaps you'd put your hardware store in the palm of your customers' hands through an app featuring 3-D imaging. Or maybe you'd take your screen repair services on the road. What about creating a learning center accessible inside and outside your store for customers to become educated on everything they need to do a project on their own? The ideas are as far as your imagination can go.

This year, the National Hardware Show® received nearly 200 applications for its new Reimagine Retail program,

which was launched to invest in and support the future of independent home improvement retailers. The retailers submitted ideas that ran the gamut from tech-savvy ambitions intended to improve operations and customer experience to store refreshes that could take a traditional hardware store into the future.

Prior to the show, a panel of industry professionals selected 10 finalists for the Reimagine Retail program.

In the following pages, you'll learn about the winning operation, Caribou Jack's Trading Co. Discover more about what is in the works for the store with the \$100,000 award in this exclusive Q&A with owner Robert Lau.

**Hardware Retailing (HR):** Can you tell us about the history of Caribou Jack's Trading Co.?

**Robert Lau (RL):** The business was founded in 1903 as Gagon's Lumber, and the Gagon family owned it until the 1970s. After that family sold the business, it changed owners a few times before my family took over in 2010.

Our goal has been to expand our focus to go beyond a hardware store to a general store and a community hub.

**HR:** What drove you to enter into the hardware industry? Why did you decide you wanted to settle in Soda Springs?

**RL:** My great-great-grandfather settled the town of Soda Springs in 1870 with three other families. My dad grew up here. While I grew up in the Washington, D.C. area, in Maryland, as a kid I visited Soda Springs often to see my grandma.

After graduating from college, I spent 14 years in northern Delaware before making the decision

## Finalists Share Amazing Ideas

In addition to Caribou Jack's Trading Co., nine other businesses were chosen as finalists for the Reimagine Retail Program. To learn about all of the other great ideas from the winners, visit [TheRedT.com/reimagine-finalists](http://TheRedT.com/reimagine-finalists).

The applications that rose to the top came from the following retailers:

- Debbie Supply in East Rochester, New York
- K Hardware Stores in Idaho Falls, Idaho
- La Grange Park Ace Hardware in La Grange Park, Illinois
- Logan Hardware in Washington, D.C.
- Mark's Supply in Frackville and Shenandoah, Pennsylvania
- Parry's in Hamilton, New York
- Sandpoint Super Drug in Sandpoint, Idaho
- Shaw Hardware Store in Plattsmouth, Nebraska
- Woods Hardware in Cincinnati, Ohio





**Caribou Jack's Trading Co.** attracts a wide range of customers, including both locals and tourists driving by on the highway.

to leave my corporate life and relocate my family to Soda Springs to own and operate my own business. I decided I wanted to come back “home,” even though I wasn’t raised here. I figured if I had another 40 years of my life working, I wanted to put it into something my forefathers believed in, which is building Soda Springs.

**HR: How did you learn about the Reimagine Retail program? Prior to the program, had you wanted to create the vision you presented?**

**RL:** I found out about the Reimagine Retail program from *Hardware Retailing's* online newsletter; right away I knew I had to apply.

For a few years, I’ve had the idea of turning the store into a place for the community to gather by adding a farm-to-table restaurant. I was just trying to figure out how to afford it. The food service industry is great, but the cost of getting into it is really high.

My idea was to incorporate items sold in the store into the restaurant by cooking with Traeger Grills and various sauces, rubs and spices we sell. This way, people could come have something made for them, or buy the items to make a meal at home.

**HR: How did you react when your store was chosen as one of the 10 finalists?**

**RL:** I didn’t think we were going to make it. I was told the finalists would be notified by a certain date and hadn’t heard anything. However, toward the end of the week I was scrolling through my email when I saw a message from Rich Russo, vice president of the National Hardware Show. He told me he’d been trying to get in touch with me and that our store was a finalist. I immediately started figuring out logistics so my wife and our four kids could leave work and school to attend the National Hardware Show with me.

There are so many smart people in the hardware industry who have achieved so much. I know there were many great ideas submitted, so it was an honor to be among the finalists and ultimately the winner.

**HR: Had you attended the National Hardware Show before this experience?**

**RL:** When I applied for the grant, I decided to register myself to go to the show. I’d never gone before, but I was so impressed that the National Hardware Show was willing to invest \$100,000 in an innovative store idea from an independent retailer that I decided I wanted to go. I usually can only afford to go to one market or show a year. However, I really enjoyed the show. The effort to attend was worth it. I kept finding cool new product ideas. Plus, we loved the Tailgate, Backyard & BBQ area because we could see the grills in action and taste the wide range of food that one could create.

Now, my intention is to find a way to attend two shows a year, both a co-op buying show and the National Hardware Show.



**Caribou Jack's Trading Co.** is a great place for locals to visit for many needs, including hardware and grilling.



Caribou Jack's Trading Co. owner **Robert Lau** (left) was presented with the \$100,000 award by **Rich Russo**, vice president of the National Hardware Show®.

**HR: What did it feel like when you learned your business won the Reimagine Retail program?**

**RL:** I was in shock! I think my whole family was. They announced our store won, the confetti shot into the room and Rich was shaking my hand. Then I shook hands with all the other finalists. I told them I appreciated their ideas as well.

I shared the news through a picture of us winning with extended family and our employees at the store. The news is still spreading through town, but I shared the article from *Hardware Retailing* on our Facebook page, and the response has been fantastic.

**HR: What are your thoughts now on the Reimagine Retail program?**

**RL:** I hope the National Hardware Show continues to run this program. I think it's remarkable because for a lot of hardware stores, we're under so much pressure from big-box stores and online retailers like Amazon and Jet.com. You may have great ideas, but unlike a large corporation, you likely don't have the extra funds to jump into these ideas as quickly as you'd like to. It's hard to reinvent yourself to become more relevant. However, the community around us is evolving and changing.

If we don't work to re-establish the importance of local retail, small and large towns will lose a lot of their shopping options. In a bind, consumers won't have anywhere to go. If they need help with a project, As local retailers, we need to reassert our importance with customers by continuing to evolve and improve.

**HR: What are your plans moving forward now that you've won the \$100,000 award?**

**RL:** I've been visiting with plumbers, electricians, truss fabricators and an engineer in town. I've also been looking at where to add on to my existing structure. I'm having conversations with the health department. In Idaho, the kitchen equipment that's installed has to go through the plumbing inspector. My goal is to have the plan in place by Memorial Day, and I'd like to start construction in June. My goal is to be done by Labor Day.

As far as operating the restaurant, I have a couple of professionally trained people in mind to help put the recipes together. I want it to be a place that people want to come back to regularly.

**HR: Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?**

**RL:** I think what this program is all about, as well as what the National Hardware Show team have done, is spark the idea of reinvesting in communities and retail around our country. The Internet is great, and big-boxes are great, but so are locally owned retail stores, which are the lifeblood of the economy. People shouldn't forget them. The Reimagine Retail program allows a store to reinvent itself and stay relevant for years to come.

This program helps shine a spotlight on smaller communities; there are thousands across the country. We don't want people to forget those small business owners.

I can't express just how grateful, thankful and humbled I am by this opportunity. It is truly a blessing for my family and myself, and hopefully for our community as well. ➡

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—Robert Lau, Caribou Jack's Trading Company