

Gold STANDARD

Gold Shield Transportation Goes the Extra Mile for Customers

By Louis Guida | Photos By Bill Luster





For George Doyle and his company, Gold Shield Transportation, door-to-door service comes with the territory, even when it's not local. Take the case of a Toyota executive who phoned Doyle out of the blue this past April after his flight out of Lexington had been delayed indefinitely. The pair had met nearly three decades earlier when the fledgling limo service owner drove the executive and his colleagues around town not long after Toyota had built its manufacturing plant in Georgetown.

"I hadn't seen or heard from him in 20 years, but he remembered me," Doyle said. "When he called, he told me he'd been sitting in the airport all day. And I understood him to say he needed a ride to Dallas to catch his flight to Japan."

Given Dallas' distance from Lexington, time was of the essence. Doyle called one of his drivers who likes working long trips. The driver met the executive a few minutes later at the airport. As they prepared to leave, Doyle reviewed the trip details on the phone with the executive's assistant.

"I told his assistant it was a 13-hour drive to Dallas and asked her the departure time for the flight to Japan. I wanted to make sure we could make it. When she heard me say Dallas, she laughed and told me his flight was leaving from Dulles airport, not Dallas."

Doyle alerted his driver, and a 900-mile, 13-hour trip west

George Doyle has developed Gold Shield into the go-to car service for busy executives and members of the horse industry.

turned instead into a 550-mile, eight-hour trip east, to the Washington, D.C., suburbs.

For Doyle, that story reveals much about the nature of the business he co-founded in 1985 and has built into what's considered the largest limo company in Kentucky, a company with a circuitous — and almost destined — backstory.

"We got into it by accident," Doyle said. He and his then business partner were Lexington police officers in the mid-1970s when Jim Host, a well-known communications and marketing impresario based in Lexington, recruited them to help with security for special corporate events.

That connection and work led the partners to start a security company, Gold Shield Custom Services, in 1982, while they were still employed at the police department. Their company soon started providing security for several high-profile local events, including the Lexington Ball and the Anita Madden and Lansdowne Club parties.

"We had no employees and no idea how to price our



services," Doyle said. "But we bought khaki pants and shirts and had security logos sewn on them."

Before long, Doyle and his partner began providing occasional limo services, using a 1979 Cadillac funeral car, in conjunction with their security work. To comply with state licensing regulations, they separated the limo services from their security business and spun it off as a separate company, Gold Shield Transportation, in 1985.

That November they bought two new Lincoln stretch limos. Soon after, Doyle said, they got their big break. "In December 1985, at 10 p.m. on a Saturday night, a woman called and said she represented a major company that was opening a facility in the area and asked if we would be interested in providing transportation services for them. She didn't mention the company's name." The company turned out to be Toyota Motor Manufacturing, which the next day would announce plans to build a major assembly plant near Georgetown, Ky. The day after the announcement Gold Shield was driving Toyota's chairman around Lexington.

The nearly 30 years since Toyota first called have seen Gold Shield expand and change. The company now owns about 40 vehicles, including a 35-seat luxury shuttle and a 24-seat limo coach (both with satellite TV), two 16-seat Hummers, four stretch limos that seat up to 10, and several vans, SUVs, and town cars. All of these are black and branded on the front windshield and rear trunk with Gold Shield's name and logo. There are also two white Bentleys, a vintage 1958 model and a modern one, used primarily for weddings.

To accommodate its fleet, Gold Shield in 2008 built a new facility off Old Frankfort Pike in Lexington with a 20,000-square-foot warehouse featuring state-of-the-art cleaning and washing (utilizing a spot-free water system) stations. "This is where



Above left, Charles Thompson is a familiar face to many Gold Shield customers. Above, the Gold Shield fleet includes an immaculate 1952 Bentley.

we knock the bugs off," Doyle said, "and dress the tires. Nobody dresses tires like we do."

The company employs 35 to 40 drivers as needed on a per-trip basis throughout the year and has one full-time office employee in addition to Doyle, who retired from the police force in 2000 after 27½ years. Doyle said it takes two weeks to train new drivers, and they learn "everything you wanted to know about being a chauffeur but never asked," including where to stand, where to walk after a client is in a vehicle, and whether to shake hands with a client. And, since all vehicles have the Gold Shield brand, "We tell all our drivers, 'You're driving a rolling billboard.'"

Business, which can be busy most of the year except from January into March, according to Doyle, "doubles and then



Right, Breann Click, with mother Rebecca and sister Brooklyn, enjoys a limousine ride to Fayette Mall as part of a Make-A-Wish Foundation effort in which Gold Shield participated.

some" Kentucky Derby week, when Gold Shield increases its number of drivers to approximately 80. Other busy times include Keeneland racing meets and sales, when Gold Shield provides transportation to and from the track and sales pavilion to fans and horse industry people from around the world.

The company makes more than 9,000 trips annually, ranging in cost from \$56 for a local ride in a three-person sedan to or from the Lexington airport to more than \$2,000 a day for a luxury vehicle during Derby week. Gold Shield is affiliated with more than 35 other major limo services worldwide and can expand its service options at any time of the year to accommodate local customers. In addition to its regular business services, Gold Shield provides limo rides periodically to two nonprofits for critically ill children, Make-A-Wish Foundation and Lexington Dream Factory.

Though it still books and drives numerous private parties, proms, weddings — witness the Bentleys — and similar social events, the backbone of Gold Shield's business — about 65 percent of it, according to Doyle — is corporate. Clients include executives, employees, and guests of Lexmark, Ashland Oil, Valvoline, Tempur-Pedic, the University of Kentucky, and other businesses, in addition to Keeneland and Toyota.

"Our corporate business can be from 4 a.m. to midnight any given day," Doyle says. "We have clients who commute every week. We take them to the airport on a Sunday night or Monday morning and pick them back up on a Friday. We do board meetings. We pick doctors up here and drive them out of state to give a talk and then bring them back."

"Gold Shield provides an important service to the horse indus-

try and other businesses here," said Rogers Beasley, Keeneland's vice president of racing. "You have corporate people coming in and out of Lexington all the time. People need to get to and from the airport. And people fly in and out of Cincinnati or Louisville and need to get here. [Gold Shield is] a great business. They're part of our growing up, of Lexington becoming a bigger city."

Doyle credits Gold Shield's growth and success through its 28 years in business to a basic philosophy and approach. "We treat everybody the same, whether they're a horse sale client coming from Dubai or they live on Lakeshore Drive in Lexington. We've driven everyone from newborn children from the hospital to the queen of England's staff on five occasions. We drive everyone the same.

"And whatever you want can be customized. If a client wants to stop at an ATM or for an aspirin and it's along the way, we do it. We give customers what they want."

Gold Shield has built a successful business based on the simple premise of going the extra mile to please customers. Consider the Toyota executive who needed the ride to Dulles. After a late-night interstate drive, he arrived in the early morning hours with enough time to check into a hotel and rest before his flight to Japan. And a story that began in Lexington with airport frustration and a phone call to an old business contact ended how — and when — it was supposed to, over a continent and an ocean away. ☛