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RIISING SONS

New York family business welcomes third generation

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Rising Sons

Dan (left) and Jeff Zielinski work topside as Pat McNeil and Jamie Rossi service a pump station control area at a municipal sewer plant for Adirondack Septic Tank. (Photos by Mitch Wojnarowicz)



Profile

Adirondack Septic Tank Amsterdam, N.Y.

Owner: Rick Zielinski

Founded: 1971

Employees: 9

Service area: A 60-mile radius of Amsterdam in eastern New York

Services: Septic service; municipal, commercial and residential waterjetting; portable sanitation



New York

As a septic pumper who used to work for his father and now has two sons as full-time employees, Rick Zielinski knows all about the ins and outs and ups and downs of working closely with family. And while he admits he's made mistakes on both ends of the spectrum, he offers some sound advice for other family-owned companies: Always talk things out. Be open-minded about new business ideas. And be sure your kids truly want to be involved in the family business.

"You want to be sure they're doing it for the right reasons, not because they think you want them to do it," says

With a third generation of owners waiting in the wings, Adirondack Septic Tank continues to grow by expanding territory, equipment and services

By Ken Wysocky

Zielinski of his sons, Jeff, 26, and Dan, 24, who are field technicians at Adirondack Septic Tank, the company his parents, Al and Sylvia Zielinski, established in 1971 in Amsterdam, N.Y. "It's a decision that involves a long-time commitment."

Zielinski knows a thing or two about that. He didn't plan on working for his father, but after earning a two-year business degree and moving to California, his father called and said he needed help. The business, started as a weekend endeavor while the elder Zielinski worked as a grocery store meat department manager, was turning into more than just a part-time gig.

FAMILY MATTERS

"In high school, I'd help him out whenever I couldn't hide or run away," Zielinski says. "But while I was living in California, we talked and decided it would be a good idea if I came back and got more involved."

That occurred in 1978, and Zielinski candidly says things didn't always go smoothly. "We butted heads a lot," he says. "He had his way of doing things and I saw it differently. He started the business, so he knew the money end and was more fiscally conservative. I, on the other hand, always wanted to buy new equipment. I didn't realize we weren't making money back then. I thought it (money) just came.

"But he'd always say we need to talk,"



The Adirondack Septic crew includes (from left) Pat McNeil, Steve Sidlauskas, Jamie Rossi, Anne Zielinski, Rick Zielinski, Sylvia Zielinski, Al Zielinski, Dan Zielinski, John Totzeck, Jeff Zielinski and Roger Larson.

Zielinski continues. “He’d tell me that if I have something on my mind, let’s get it out there ... so we can come to an agreement on it, without it festering. Certainly there were times when we walked away in silence, or yelling and screaming. But in the end, it always came out and we both felt better about it — putting down the baggage.”

The third-generation of Zielinskis came on board full time in 2009 after working at Adirondack during summers in high school and college. But the similarities end there.

Like his father, Jeff first worked elsewhere after college for four or five years before he saw advantages in running his own business. Dan, however, always planned to work for the family business after college.

“I didn’t exactly encourage Jeff because I wanted him to do it for his reasons, not my reasons,” Zielinski says. “But he convinced me he really wanted to do this. He saw potential in being a business owner, both the financial rewards and gratification. Plus this is an established business — what better place to go?”

“DAD HAS A LOT OF THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT WITH DAY-TO-DAY MANAGEMENT OF THE COMPANY, BUT THAT GIVES DAN AND I OPPORTUNITIES TO TAKE TIME AND LOOK AT NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR US.”

Jeff Zielinski

JETTER SPARKS EXPANSION

After the Zielinskis enjoyed a solid early business expansion, a fortuitous equipment purchase helped broaden the family company’s service offerings and generate a lot of business. In 1986, the elder Zielinski attended the Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo International and bought a new E.E. Myers trailer-mounted waterjetter, which he says at the time was considered a “newfangled gadget.”

Newfangled or not, the machine quickly generated unexpected business opportunities. It also underscored the importance of developing diverse services, which today is a company hallmark; its sales revenue breaks down into about 40 percent septic pumping, 30 percent waterjetting and 20 percent portable restrooms, Zielinski says.

Armed with the waterjetter, Adirondack started to serve customers in a variety of ways, cleaning everything from water tanks and residential and commercial pipelines to sump pits, culverts and sewage plants. “Going from



Jeff Zielinski looks on as Dan Zielinski and Jamie Rossi use a Vivax-Metrotech Corp. vCam digital camera and US Jetting Inc. jetter to fix a clogged kitchen drain at a nursing home.



The varied Adirondack Septic Tank fleet of vacuum and other service trucks and equipment is shown at the company yard.

a cable machine to a jetter was a huge leap," Zielinski says. "It opened up doors we didn't even know were there."

As the business grew, so did the company's fleet of trucks. After years of building their own trucks, Adirondack instead purchased bigger, tandem-axle vacuum trucks with larger-capacity pumps and tanks.

"First of all, we wanted to optimize our loads on service runs — make one trip in-

stead of two, which meant more money in our pocket," Zielinski explains. "Plus, our customer base had increased numbers-wise and geographically. Then, with the larger trucks, we started to service schools and trailer parks that we couldn't do before because it wasn't cost-effective from a hauling standpoint."

MONEY-MAKING FLEET

Today, Adirondack's equipment list reflects its consistent growth; gross revenues have doubled since 1999, Zielinski says.

On the septic pumping side of the business, Adirondack relies on a 1989 Kenworth with a 3,000-gallon steel tank built by Presvac Systems Ltd.; a 2002 Freightliner with a 4,000-gallon aluminum dump tank built by Presvac; and a 2006 International with a 2,500-gallon aluminum tank built by Karymore. All use Utile pumps, made by Utile Engineering Co. Ltd.

Adirondack also owns several hundred portable restrooms, mostly standard units from Satellite Industries Inc., as well as several home-made restroom trailers and one 20-footer built by Olympia Fiberglass Industries.

To service portable restrooms, Adirondack depends on a 1999

Ford with a stainless steel tank (300 gallons waste/150 gallons freshwater); and a 2005 GMC with a steel tank (500 gallons waste/250 gallons freshwater). The company also owns two 4018 trailer-mounted jettors made by US Jetting Inc. (4,000 psi at 18 gpm). The jettors are standard units housed in enclosed, insulated trailers, Zielinski points out.

"In the last decade, I've seen the importance of keeping an eye out for any equipment that might improve or add value to the business," Zielinski says. "We've probably invested a half-million dollars in good equipment during the last five years."

SCHEDULED MAINTENANCE

Adirondack has increased profitability and efficiency by emphasizing scheduled maintenance of septic systems. Zielinski compares it to changing the oil in a car engine periodically, rather than waiting until there's a problem.

"It pays to maintain what you have in place. Moreover, we can do it at the customers' convenience and avoid emergency calls on weekends or in the middle of the night, when we'd have to up-charge," he explains of his pitch to get customers to bite on planned maintenance.

Zielinski also works to get customers to add risers to make the regular maintenance easier and so technicians can spend less time digging and more time pumping profits into the business.

"It's easier to sell customers on risers when we point out that the cost of installing them is just about offset by the lower fee for cleaning the tank the next time around, because there's no excavating," he says.

The purchase of a computer about 15 years ago paved the way for scheduled maintenance, because it made it much easier to ef-



Adirondack Septic Tank owner Rick Zielinski operates the pump during a job at a nursing home.

ISLAND PUMP-OUT CREATES CHALLENGES

Many things come into play when a company tries to diversify and expand its services, not the least of which is smart equipment purchases and hiring good employees. But Rick Zielinski says there's another, more intangible factor involved: the fear factor — or rather, the lack of it.

"You can't be afraid to take on a challenge," says the owner of Adirondack Septic Tank in Amsterdam, N.Y., a business whose sales revenue has doubled since 1999, largely through diversification and geographic expansion.

A good case in point is a job Adirondack first tackled four years ago, involving maintenance of a septic system that serves cottages at a Christian camp. It may not sound all that intimidating, but the cottages' location isn't exactly convenient: on an island in the middle of a lake, about 1,500 feet from shore. And the job must be done in winter, when the camp is unoccupied.

"There aren't any barges available on the lake to get equipment over to island," Zielinski says. "So we decided to try and pump tanks from the mainland."

Zielinski opted to use 1,500 feet of hose and several 1,500-gallon plastic tanks, plus utilize a vacuum truck as the primary pump.

"We put four transfer pumps along the way across the ice to keep things moving through the hose," he explains. "There is minimal elevation difference between the island and the shore, but we still didn't know if it would work ... the first year was a learning experience."

Adirondack technicians use air pressure and a Crust Buster, manufactured by Schmitz Brothers LLC, to agitate the waste in the tanks. Zielinski says the job went better than anticipated the first year, and only required two transfer pumps, not four.

"Now it goes pretty efficiently," he says. "We bring just about everything we own up there because it's a remote area, so there aren't a lot of resources available. It's an all-day job ... we typically fill two trucks and bring a third along, just in case."

The job still requires good weather (cold, but not uncomfortably so) and optimal ice conditions.

"We've got it down to a science now," Zielinski says. "I like the challenge, and the job brings the whole crew together. Typically we're off in separate directions every day. Plus, it's a beautiful place to work. Our guys look forward to this job every year."

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— WHAT BETTER PLACE TO GO?"**

Rick Zielinski



Rick Zielinski

customer data.

TRANSITION AHEAD

Jeff and Dan Zielinski, who have earned college degrees in marketing and management respectively, are eager to put their imprint on Adirondack. Jeff Zielinski worked for about four years for a family-owned recreational equipment retailer and says he slowly realized he'd rather work for his family's business.

"I always knew that the option existed, but I felt it was important for me to pave my own way for a bit and get some experience outside of Adirondack — see what else is out there and learn how other successful companies do things," he says. "It got to the point where I started to question why I was so busy busting my chops for someone else's family — maybe I should be working for my family and bring a different point of view to the table at Adirondack."

He says he's already applied some things he learned from his prior job to Adirondack's operations, such as obtaining better prices for items by purchasing directly from manufacturers instead of local distributors. "Before, everyone was too busy to look at things like that," he says. "Now we try to place an order before we need things, rather than pay more because we pick something up on the way to a job. Part of my duties involved purchasing goods, so I know how to obtain volume discounts. By spending a little more, you actually save money in the long run."

Developing a company Web site as well as more formal, streamlined processes and systems for things such as employee training also top the brothers' agenda.

"Our grandfather started things and Dad came on and did a fantastic job of building on what Grandpa did," Jeff Zielinski says. "We're both of the same mindset: If it

ain't broke, don't fix it ... but there are things we can tweak.

"The biggest benefit is there now are a couple extra sets of eyes to see new ideas," he adds. "Dad has a lot of things to worry about with day-to-day management of the company, but that gives Dan and I opportunities to take time and look at new technologies and what makes sense for us."

Looking forward, Rick Zielinski is pleased about how his sons are slowly taking over more and more responsibility while he eases his way out of the business. "I don't see myself retiring 100 percent, but it would be nice to take a few months off in winter and a couple in summer. That would be retirement as far as I'm concerned."

While on the subject of family, Zielinski also emphasizes the important role his wife, Anne, plays as office manager. "Without her organizational skills and customer rapport, it would be impossible for me to keep the field work moving along smoothly," Zielinski says. "I realize it hasn't always been easy for Anne to balance family needs and the demands of a busy office, but somehow she manages to accomplish just that."

The bottom line: Zielinski is thrilled to work with his sons and have them carry on the family legacy.

"It makes me feel very proud," he says. "And I know my father also is very proud to see something he's started from nothing develop into a profitable, progressive business." ■

More Info

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Schmitz Brothers**
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Satellite Industries Inc.
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US Jetting LLC
800/538-8464
www.usjetting.com

Vivax-Metrotech Corp.
800/446-3392
www.vxmt.com

efficiently track when customers needed service and to send out reminder mailings. Over the years, the company upgraded the computer and now uses QuickBooks software from Intuit Inc., which ties together financial and