

Rolfe Garrett (foreground) discusses strategy with Bruce Kahlenberg, using a Nissan Mini-Excavator at an onsite system repair job. (Photos courtesy of Robyn's Septic Service)

Still Behind the Wheel

Can-do Maryland auto dealership executive trades suit-and-tie career for the keys to his own vacuum truck and finds a challenging new business to love

By Seiche Sanders

Profile

Robyn's Septic Service

Forest Hill, Md.

Owners: Rolfe and Robyn Garrett

Years in Business: 3

Employees: 4

Annual Sales: \$200,000 plus

Service Area: Harford, Cecil and Baltimore counties

Specialties: Residential septic maintenance, septic system inspections and certifications, drinking water sampling and testing, commercial septic and grease trap cleaning, industrial wastewater hauling, drain cleaning and waterjetting, septic system repairs.

Equipment: L-9000 vacuum truck with a 3,500-gallon tank from Indiana Vacuum Trucks, Ford F-800 vacuum truck with 2,400-gallon tank and Harben Jetter from Abernethy Welding, two General Pipe Cleaners portable jetters, assorted cable drain machines, Ford E-350 service vehicle.

Associations: National Association of Wastewater Transporters Certified Septic Inspector, Maryland Department of the Environment Certified Septic Inspector, National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association, Maryland Department of the Environment Certified Drinking Water Sampler, Maryland Onsite Wastewater Professionals Association, Harford County Chamber of Commerce, Harford County Association of Realtors, Cecil County Association of Realtors

Web Site: www.robynsseptic.com



Rolfe Garrett never imagined he'd wind up servicing septic systems for a living. But today, he's sure glad his career took the turn it did.

Garrett owns Robyn's Septic Services in Forest Hill, Md., with his wife of 17 years — and the company's namesake — Robyn. He's a relative newcomer to the business, having worked in the automotive industry for 25 years before buying a small, one-man liquid waste company in August 2003. He quickly built the business into what it is today, a fast-growing, progressive company that boasts \$200,000-plus in annual sales.

Trading in his suit-and-tie job for a seat in a pumper truck was not a decision Garrett took lightly — he did extensive research on the industry before deciding that servicing septic systems might be just the business for him.

Garrett studied the industry to gauge its growth potential, but it still didn't prepare him entirely for what he was about to undertake. His entry into the septic cleaning and maintenance business required something of a leap of faith, as well as a little bit of chance. He also encountered a fair amount of skepticism.

GETTING STARTED

During 25 years in the automotive industry, Garrett worked as the operations manager for the parts and service departments at various car dealerships. Just before entering the liquid waste industry, he was in charge of two of the dealership's stores.

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Robyn and Rolfe Garrett of Robyn's Septic Service.

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Rolfe Garrett

es on a particular block, or in a certain neighborhood. Garrett used this information to put together targeted direct-mail campaigns.

“The septic marketing was a little trickier (than automotive marketing). You could have one side of the street septic and one could be municipal. With the criss-cross, we knew we had X-amount of homes in a particular neighborhood. We could send out postcards and know they were hitting the right marks.”

Another lucky break for Garrett was his timing. Garrett bought the business just when Yellow Pages advertising was closing for the year.

“Another thing I learned from the automotive business was that you have to advertise. We spent a fairly large amount on Yellow Pages advertising, and also placed some small, inexpensive ads in the local circulars.” The company’s marketing plan has allowed him to stand out from the competition. The couple tout their business as “family friendly.” Since women in households often handle septic system cleaning ordering, the Garretts make an effort to appeal to that demographic.

“We make sure that they’re treated with respect, and we talk to them in a way that makes them feel comfortable

Now 44, Garrett was pondering a career change when he began noticing the steady stream of vacuum trucks going in and out of the wastewater treatment plant located near the dealership where he worked.

“I noticed the pumper trucks going down the road. I got to looking, and noticed they were rolling all day long,” Garrett says. “I also started noticing who the big operators were.”

Robyn Garrett was less convinced that this was the industry for her husband.

“When I told my wife I was looking into buying a septic business, she just laughed,” says Garrett. A few months after he broached the topic to Robyn, Garrett noticed a hand-painted sign by the side of the road, while out on a test drive with a customer. It read: “Septic cleaning company for sale.”

“I got back to the office and called Robyn,” Garrett says. “I said, ‘There’s a septic company for sale, and I’m going to talk to the guy.’”

That company turned out to be Herman Leiske & Sons (Garrett renamed the company after he bought it). Herman Leiske was operating the business his father and grandfather ran — it had been in the family for 43 years. He was looking to get out and offering an older vacuum truck and a short customer list.

Garrett made an offer and Leiske accepted it. The sum of the purchase? A vacuum truck and three customers: two commercial accounts and one diner. (Ironically, one of the three accounts “quit” only a few weeks after the purchase.) There was also some odd residential work, but the company hadn’t advertised to secure new business.

“I really believed there was a huge opportunity in this industry for a businessman,” he says. It appears Garrett’s hunch was correct.

RIGHT ON THE MONEY

“We started with two customers, and now our customer list is over 800,” says Garrett, adding company sales are growing at a 27 percent annual rate.

The growth hasn’t always been easy — Garrett had to learn the business basically from scratch. The former owner stayed on with the company for four to five months, and still helps out from time to time, but Garrett’s entry into the business was, in essence, trial by fire. First, he needed to learn to drive a truck.

“I had some experience from the automotive industry with heavy trucks, but I hadn’t driven them too much,” Garrett explains. Those first few days in the truck were nerve-racking. “There was a lot of gear-grinding and a lot of sweaty palms. The first month or two I’d come home and say, ‘I don’t know if I can do this anymore’ because the anxiety was so high, just because I wasn’t used to it.”

But it didn’t take long before Garrett had a handle on things. He was then able to turn his attentions to building the business.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

An effective marketing plan has been paramount in helping Garrett and Robyn grow their business.

Robyn Garrett, who has maintained her full-time career in the mortgage business, is also fully involved in the day-to-day operations of the business — she fields most of the customer calls and manages the scheduling. Her background in real estate has come in handy as the company grows.

One of the couple’s first purchases for the company was software that generates “criss-cross” directories — a real estate tool where users can type in an address and obtain all the address-

Rolfe Garrett (right) checks a lift station pump control setting. (Below) Garrett uses a General Pipe Cleaners Mini-Rooter cable machine (below) to clear an outlet pipe that caused a septic system backup.



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— I learned that from the car business,” Garrett says. “The majority of calls we get — 95 percent — are from the women of the house. They want to talk to someone that treats them with respect.”

INDUSTRY IMMERSION

Garrett’s timing was also good in that there was a NOWRA (National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association Inc.) conference in Franklin, Tenn., right after he bought the business. In addition to the NOWRA A-Z course, he took the National Association of Wastewater Transporters, Inc. Certified Septic Inspector Training that was conducted during the conference. Garrett found the training invaluable.

“It taught me that this is a huge industry — much bigger than I ever anticipated — and got me time with some guys who owned businesses (in the industry).” Garrett spent the week quizzing his peers on every aspect of the business.

“The first good look I got at septic systems was the slides at the conference,” he says.

Robyn’s Septic Service’s business is now 60 percent residential, 20 percent commercial and the balance is repair work. Garrett currently has two trucks,

a Ford L-9000 vacuum truck with 3,500-gallon tank, and a Ford F-800 vacuum truck with 2,400-gallon tank. Garrett hopes to add to his fleet in the future, but for now, takes comfort in knowing what he has is bought and paid for.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Garrett’s continuous quest for industry information and education sets him apart from his competition, he says. He spends 50 to 60 hours a year on continuing education, much of it focused on inspection, a growing area of his business. He currently holds the title of National Association of Wastewater Transporters certified inspector, is certified through the Maryland Department of Environment (they offer cooperative training through a local college), is a certified drinking water sampler and is involved in every association he can join.

After each educational opportunity, the Garretts pass the knowledge on to their employees — two full-time and two part-time. Soon, Garrett will take the NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) Accredited On-Site Wastewater System Inspector test. He has also received training from the Maryland Onsite Wastewater



Rolfe Garrett inspects a septic system outlet baffle.

Professionals Association.

Garrett sees a general lack of quality training among some others in the industry. Many have learned through trial and error, he says, instead of learning the technical aspects of the business.

FACING THE COMPETITION

Strong competition is the biggest challenge Robyn’s Septic faces.

“The operators in my area are really professional, and they really inspire me every day to do better,” he says. “They’ve been in business for a long time, and when I see how well they’re doing, it makes me want to do better.” There are three to four large operators and a handful of smaller operators in Garrett’s immediate area. He compares the smaller ones to himself, but says: “I always look to the best guy in the game to model myself after.”

One of the things Garrett found most difficult in transitioning into the septic business was

the sheer physicality of the work.

“The most difficult thing was taking off the suit and tie and getting on the work clothes and going back to a physical job. I thought I was readier for that than I was. After a few long days on the truck, I found out it’s a pretty physical job.”

That doesn’t mean Garrett regrets his decision to join the industry.

“I’ve always thought that if you pick the hardest, most difficult or undesirable jobs and you do those well, you’re going to succeed much faster and excel,” he explains. “Because anyone can do the easy jobs — everyone wants to be a rock star or a restaurant owner.”

Next Garrett plans to concentrate on system inspection and repair — areas where he sees the greatest potential for growth.

“One of the fortunate things we ended up with is, with Robyn’s real estate background, we had inroads with inspection.” With some of the septic inspection training he has received, Garrett was left feeling like he knew less than when he started.

Garrett says the NAWT inspection course, however, provided much of the technical information he was seeking. “That really opened my eyes to how technical and difficult this could be.”

Since he got started in the business, Garrett has had many people ask him, “How could you go into a business that you knew nothing about?”

“It never occurred to me (that I couldn’t do it),” Garrett says. “My heart of hearts and my will told me that I could make it happen.” ■

Auto Sales Lessons Help Garrett Compete in Pumping Industry

Rolfe Garrett’s business acumen, gleaned from 25 years in the automotive industry, has several applications to the liquid waste industry, and he has put those skills to work for his business.

Patience: “The number one thing I brought to this business is patience,” says Garrett. “When you’re out working with customers, you have to go in with the knowledge that they don’t understand everything. If you take the extra time and explain what’s going on, it builds the trust factor.”

Business skills: Garrett’s experience running departments of large businesses taught him the accounting, purchasing, and negotiation skills he uses daily in his business. “If you’re a businessman first, owning any type of business is a lot easier.”

Customer service: Garrett says the easiest part of transitioning from the automotive to the septic industry is relating to customers. Both sets of customers value someone who can explain the products and services in a way that’s easy to understand. They also want to be treated with respect.



Rolfe Garrett stands beside his 1994 Ford F-800 vacuum truck.