

Billy Shaw is shown with one of the C & W Hanover Septic trucks built out by Imperial Industries and running a National Vacuum Equipment blower. (Photos by Kevin Blackburn)

# FAMILY FIRST

The C & W Hanover Septic crew remembers Scott Knight's legacy of hard work and customer service as they pump, repair and install onsite systems in Virginia *By Ken Wysocky*

**M**any factors have contributed to C & W Hanover Septic's success over the last four decades, including service diversity, an emphasis on newer and well-maintained trucks, embracing productivity- and profitability-enhancing technology, and a strong commitment to customer service.

But in the end, the story of this Mechanicsville, Virginia-based company's business odyssey — which started when the late Scott Knight bought the company in the late 1970s — centers squarely on both family and the hard work and sacrifices required to keep a family business operating.

For years, Knight and his wife, Trudie Knight, ran the company mostly by themselves, with help from Trudie's son, Billy Shaw, who now owns the business and runs it with his wife, Melissa Shaw, who is vice president. "I've never seen anyone with the work ethic of my stepfather and my mom," Billy says. "They taught me to provide customer service that's second to none."

## C & W Hanover Septic Mechanicsville, Virginia

**OWNER:** Billy Shaw

**YEARS IN BUSINESS:** About 50

**EMPLOYEES:** 11

**SERVICE AREA:** 40-mile radius around Mechanicsville

**SERVICES:** Residential septic service; septic system installation and repair

**WEBSITE:** [www.cwhanoverseptic.com](http://www.cwhanoverseptic.com)



Billy started working for his stepfather in 1996, filling in after school and working full time during summers. After graduating from high school, he went to college, where he planned to earn a business degree before returning to the family business.

But all those plans suddenly changed in 2001 when Scott was diagnosed with cancer. "I dropped out of college in 2001, and he passed away in 2004," Billy says. "The plan was to get a business degree and eventually take over the company. ... It just happened earlier than expected."

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**Above:** Vacuum service driver Cole Margulies arrives at a home to pump a tank. On the left is one of three International service trucks from Imperial Industries, all using National Vacuum Equipment blowers.

**Right:** Billy Shaw confers with his mother, Trudie Knight, on the day's workload.



"Then mom owned the company," he continues. "She'd been working in the office since the mid-1980s, so she knew everything about the business. She and I pretty much ran the company together. I bought the company in January 2017, but she still works in the office — and she still works as hard as she ever did."

### HIS MEMORY LIVES

Route drivers are reminded of Scott every time they head out on the road, courtesy of the phrase "Riding with SPK" (Scott's initials) lettered on all the trucks. "We all see that every day, and it reminds us that he's the reason all this is going on," Billy says.

Furthermore, Trudie also ensures his legacy is honored every day through a sharp focus on helping customers. "Her knowledge has been so invaluable to us," Melissa says. "She knows the ins and outs of the septic business better than anyone."

"And she has a world of patience, too," she adds. "She'll help customers fix their own pumps and diagnose problems over the phone. She really enjoys the interaction with customers. Without her, we wouldn't be where we are today."

"She never let me slack off one bit," adds Billy. "She made me the man I am today."

The Knights' emphasis on customer service also lives on in ways both big and small. Melissa says that even if customers call at 3 a.m., Trudie will answer the phone — not an answering service. "One time we answered the phone at 10:45 p.m. on a Friday and got a frantic customer who was in tears," she says. "Billy tried troubleshooting with her for more than half an hour. Finally, at 11:30 p.m., Billy said, 'We have to go out there.' And he did."

Another time, a customer's wedding ring fell down a sink drain. Jimmy Butler, a technician, went to pump out the tank. Before leaving the job site, he'd found the ring and returned it.

"Our company is only as good as its employees," Billy says. "Our three drivers are unbelievable — very polite and considerate." His assertion is backed by the company's cumula-

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“ We have to live up to our slogan, which is 'Serving all your septic needs.' That helps us attract customers, as well as retain them, because they know we're a one-stop shop that will take care of all their problems. ”

MELISSA SHAW



Shown in the crew photo are Margulies, Ed Schneck, Joe Loblano, Ben Robins, Scott Riggs, Chris Gove, Jimmy Butler, Knight, Billy Shaw, Melissa Shaw, Susan Parsley and Shawn Riggs.



Jimmy Butler, left, and Shawn Riggs lay out new corrugated plastic lines to replace those clogged with sediment.

gravity and alternative systems. They use concrete tanks made by Hanover Precast about 95% of the time, as well as plastic tanks made by Infiltrator Water Technologies, Billy says.

In certain situations, the company installs a variety of alternative systems used on sites with challenging soils and terrain. They use AdvanTex fixed-growth systems from Orenco Systems and aerobic systems made by Clearstream Wastewater Systems, BioMicrobics (MircoFAST), Delta Treatment Systems (ECOPOD) and Fuji Clean USA. The company also occasionally installs peat fiber systems made by Anua (Puraflo) and Premier Tech Aqua (Ecoflo). In addition, Billy orders EZSet risers by Infiltrator.

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Billy Shaw, foreground, and Ed Schneck provide maintenance to an AdvanTex system from Orenco Systems.

tive 4.7 out of five stars rating on Google reviews. Almost every review praises the company's employees for their dedication and high level of customer service.

"We pay a lot of attention to online reviews because we use them ourselves," Melissa says. "It's one of the best gauges of a company's performance."

### ONE-STOP SHOP

About 50% of the company's revenue stem from pumping, with system repairs chipping in roughly 30% and installations accounting for the balance. Billy says the company has been diversified since the day Scott bought it.

"We want to help our customers 100%," he says. "I would hate to go out, pump a tank, find something wrong and then tell the customer, 'Sorry, this is your problem,' and just walk away. We want to be able to fix whatever the problem is. In fact, we bought a water jetter just so we wouldn't have to tell customers to call someone else if they have a clogged line."

"We have to live up to our slogan, which is 'Serving all your septic needs,'" Melissa adds. "That helps us attract customers, as well as retain them, because they know we're a one-stop shop that will take care of all their problems."

Pumping is particularly valuable because it leads to repairs — and sometimes even new installations. "We do so many repairs because we pump so many tanks," Billy says, noting the company pumps out roughly 4,000 tanks a year.

The company installs about 50 septic systems a year, both conventional

## The ties that bind: Family and friends create a caring culture

It's usually easier to create a familylike atmosphere at smaller companies, but it's been even easier at C & W Hanover Septic in Mechanicsville, Virginia. Why? Out of the company's 11 employees, all but two are either related or were good friends before they were hired, says Melissa Shaw, vice president and the wife of company owner Billy Shaw.

The other eight employees are Billy's mother, Trudie Knight (who's been with the company ever since her late husband, Scott Knight, bought the company in the late 1970s); Joe Loblano, Shawn Riggs and Jimmy Butler, who do installations and repairs; route drivers Scott Riggs (Shawn's son), Cole Margulies and Chris Gove; Susan Parsley, secretary; and the newest employee, Ben Robins, who's being trained to do installations.

"Joe has been with us for 12 years and is my right-hand man," Billy says. "And we also have to mention Ed Schneck, a local school teacher who has worked with us seasonally for the last five summers."

In an industry where attracting and retaining employees is a challenge, C & W Hanover Septic has minimal employee turnover. One reason is that all the employees were hired through referrals from existing employees and friends. In addition, the company offers top-level benefits, including paying for all health care insurance premiums for not just employees, but their families, too, Melissa says.

"It's a big expense, but it's something we can do for them that's the icing on the cake," she explains. "We don't want them to go anywhere else. We want them to know we value them and want them to feel appreciated."

The company also offers IRA savings plans, and in 2015, the Shaws took all employees and their spouses on a five-day, all-expenses-paid cruise to Bermuda. Other benefits include an annual Christmas dinner, Christmas bonuses and flex time, she says.

"All of our employees are salaried, too, so we don't really keep a record of their time off," she adds. "It's just another benefit of working for a small, tightknit business."

On their birthdays, employees receive a \$100 gift card. They also receive annual salary increases. And if an employee soldiers through an especially tough week, Melissa might hand out \$50 to \$100 bonuses. "I want to show them that I appreciate it when they work longer days or have a super-busy week," she says. "We know how hard it is to work on weeks like that."

"If you do find someone who's good, you have to take care of them and show them how valuable they are," Billy says. "If not, they'll go out and find something else." And as a bonus, Melissa says she's found that employees who know they're appreciated will always do more than what's expected of them.



**Above:** Billy and Melissa Shaw are shown with their children, Mason and Hadley.

**Left:** Scott Knight, shown with Trudie Knight, bought the company in the 1970s and passed away in 2004.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

To keep installations and routes running smoothly, the company relies on Jobber, a business management software designed for service businesses. The company also used GPS trackers from Verizon Connect to keep track of service vehicles.

“We get a lot of emergency pumping calls during the day,” Melissa says. “The GPS tracking helps us figure out who’s closest and how fast they can get there. It makes scheduling so much easier, plus it also keeps track of scheduled maintenance for vehicles, which is a big help.”

Of course, providing so many services requires a large fleet of equipment. The company owns three vacuum trucks, all built by Imperial Industries on 2018, 2019 and 2020 International chassis. Each truck carries a 4,000-gallon aluminum tank and is equipped with a National Vacuum Equipment 4307 blower (560 cfm). The company also runs a backup truck built by Pik Rite on a 2013 Peterbilt 382 chassis with a 4,000-gallon aluminum tank and a Masport 400 pump.

As indicated by the model years, the company has started to replace trucks on a regular cycle. The main reason? Billy says he’d rather make a monthly fixed payment on a new truck than keep trucks so long that unexpected repairs get out of hand and disrupt budgeting and cash flow.

“We haven’t always done this (buy a new truck three years in a row), and I don’t know that I even meant to do it,” Billy explains. “In one instance, we added a new employee, so we needed a new truck. But the main reason is that it seems like you pay \$5,000 or \$10,000 every time you take a truck in for repairs.

“Especially with the emission systems on newer trucks ... it seems like there always are issues,” he continues. “So now we plan to swap trucks out of our fleet every five years.” As insurance, the company takes out extended five-year warranties on the work vehicles.

Billy also believes that new trucks look nicer, which helps promote the company and increases brand recognition. “Our guys keep our trucks really clean,” he says. “Our bright lime-green lettering really pops against the shiny aluminum tanks.

“We like to grow slow. Our goal is to keep that small, family-run business feel and keep our customers and employees as our top priority.”

**BILLY SHAW**

“We get calls all the time from customers who tell us how nice our trucks look. I think people would prefer to deal with a company that keeps things looking nice.”

## THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

For installations, the company relies on a 2018 Link-Belt excavator, 2015 Kubota mini-excavator, 2015 Takeuchi track loader, 2015 Ford F-350 service truck, 2014 Ford Econoline service van, 2017 Ford transit service van, 2008 Mack Granite tri-axle dump truck, Eager Beaver Trailers 20-ton flatbed trailer for hauling excavation equipment, Towmaster 9-ton trailer and 2007 Caterpillar backhoe.

To perform drainline cleaning and maintenance, the company invested in a Spartan Tool 727 cart-mounted water jetter (3,000 psi at 4 gpm); five pipeline inspection cameras, one Spartan Tool Explorer L200 and four MSA-NG2 MyTana Mfg. models; and a MyTana Mfg. cable machine for cleaning drainlines.

But more often than not, Billy says the company replaces lines instead of cleaning them. “We’ve found that a lot of times when we clean a line, it continues to have problems, especially if they’re old cast iron pipes,” he explains. “We’d rather replace those with PVC so customers will have less problems down the road.”

Speaking of down the road, what do the Shaws see for the future of C & W Hanover Septic?

“I’d like to grow a little bit, but not a lot,” Billy says. “I wouldn’t mind growing enough to justify a second installation-and-repair crew and one more route driver.

“We like to grow slow,” he adds, pointing out that after 40 years, the company still has only 11 employees — and most of them came on board within the last 10 years. “Our goal is to keep that small, family-run business feel and keep our customers and employees as our top priority.” ■

## MORE INFO

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