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Moving Out of the Oilfield and Into the Drainfield

A slump in the Oklahoma petroleum industry led Michael and Dawn Rohrs make a change. They launched Cyclone Septics and found consistent prosperity.

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✍ By Ted J. Rulseh

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📌 Cover Story



Dawn, Michael and Austin Rohrs look on as an excavation is dug for a new septic tank. (Photos by David McNeese)

For 20 years Dawn Rohrs worked as a drilling engineer in the oil fields in four states. When the oil industry crashed several years ago, she found herself laid off.

“I was driving my husband crazy sitting at home,” she recalls. “We decided we had better diversify, because both of our livelihoods were tied to the oil fields.” (Her husband Michael worked in an oil company machine shop.)

In 2016 they formed Cyclone Septic and Shelters, based in Guthrie, Oklahoma, about 20 miles north of Oklahoma City. They do a brisk business in onsite installations, the vast majority using aerobic treatment units with spray dispersal.

They manufacture their own concrete septic tanks and the tanks for NuWater ATUs from Enviro-Flo. The business has prospered with population growth around Oklahoma City and across the state. Their eight-member team includes sons Austin, 26, and Cody, 21. Dawn continued working in the oil industry off and on until 2021 and still does some consulting.

GETTING STARTED

A personal connection helped the couple choose a new livelihood. “We had a friend who was a tank manufacturer for NuWater,” recalls Dawn, who holds a chemical engineering degree from the University of North Dakota and is working on an MBA. “He convinced us to try installing, and we jumped in feet first.”

They used Dawn’s severance from the oil company to buy an excavator and trailer. When their friend closed his business a few years ago, they bought some of his equipment and took on tank manufacturing. That propelled the company from \$400,000 in annual revenue to \$1.5 million in one year. They sell about 300 tanks per year.

In recent years they have made some key strategic decisions. They used to cast concrete storm shelters but have de-emphasized that side of the business; now when a customer calls for a shelter they purchase a unit and install it. Accordingly, they changed the company name to Cyclone Septics.

They have also cut back on the installation side to focus more on manufacturing, which requires fewer specialized and skilled workers; the local labor market is tight. From a peak of about 250 onsite installations per year, they now perform about 150, focusing on area builders with whom they have enjoyed the most mutually beneficial business relationships.

Dawn and Michael are state-certified onsite installers; Dawn is also a licensed soil profiler. She handles the business side of the company; Michael leads the field operation and performs all equipment maintenance.

Austin Rohrs is service manager, an installer and “our technical guru,” says Dawn. “If there’s a system problem, he’s the guy who will solve it. He knows the NuWater systems inside and out.” Cody is the service technician and handles ATU maintenance and system inspections. Both are studying engineering at the University of Central Oklahoma.

The remaining team members are Alberto Duran, manufacturing lead; Levi Karcher, installer; Nate Karcher, ground crew member; and Stacy Forsyth, administration.

CHALLENGING SITES

The area’s clay soils present design and installation challenges, and so do homeowners building large houses on relatively small lots.

In clay soils the company often installs evapotranspiration/absorption systems. “An ETA is essentially a conventional system with about double the footprint,” Dawn observes. “It’s just a little bit shallower. Instead of it being an absorption system where the water goes down, you depend on evaporation, so the water has to move up.

“We install the laterals in much the same way, except we put sand on top of the chambers (Infiltrator Water Technologies). Then we bring in a sandy loam soil as cover for the top three inches. All the soil that is excavated for the trenches is hauled off.”

Last year about 95% of the company’s installations were ATUs. “In central Oklahoma aerobics are prevalent across the board,” says Dawn. “In the subdivisions you don’t have space for conventionals because everybody wants to put a 5,000-square-foot house, a swimming pool and a shop on a half-acre lot.”

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Aerobic systems with spray dispersal have the advantages of being quick to install and causing less disturbance to the site. “All we’re putting in the ground is a tank,” says Dawn. “Then we trench in the sprinkler lines. The footprint is a fraction of what it would be with a conventional system.” The company uses Rain Bird and K-Rain sprinklers.

Spray field sizes are determined in part by climate. For example, in Oklahoma’s western counties with limited rainfall, a four-bedroom house may need 3,000 square feet of spray field; systems in eastern counties with more rain may require twice that. Soil type is also a factor: heavy clay soils require larger spray fields.

Dawn and Michael have been well satisfied with NuWater treatment units. “What I really like is that they’re easy to work on,” says Dawn. NuWater has two alarm lights. “So that immediately tells us if there is an air issue or a pump issue. We can troubleshoot over the phone, and our maintenance techs know what they’re getting into before they leave the office.”

IMPARTING KNOWLEDGE

Customer education is a key to the design of efficient treatment systems. About 90% of installations are for homebuilders, and sound advice on the front end can help them avoid poor decisions that cost money later on. “For instance, they would run the sewer line underneath the footings,” says Dawn. “In Oklahoma, tanks can’t be set more than 36 inches deep. When the sewer line comes out 28 inches deep, that causes problems.”

Some builders placed the structures in ways that made it difficult to find space for a spray field. In other cases, they put the cleanout on a side of the house as close as 10 feet from the property line. “Now we have to put the tank 40 feet away and run the sewer line,” says Dawn. “They really need to plan where the septic system is going to be before they start laying out anything else on the lot.”

She has started offering a course for real estate agents on how to sell homes with septic systems. That's important because Oklahoma City and some other municipalities are not willing to extend sewer lines unless the developers pay for them. As a result, large subdivisions on the outer city limits are being built with septic systems. Her class for real estate agents covers basic ways to assess septic system condition, such as walking across the lateral field to see whether it is wet, a possible indication of failure.

For homeowner education, the company created a website, www.justadddbleach.com, where other installers can share information with their customers on system care and troubleshooting. "A lot of installers buy tanks from us," says Dawn. "We understand that installers don't want to send their customers to a competitor.

"So we put the website out there. It doesn't mention that we're installers. It just tells them, 'You have a NuWater system; here are some things you need to know.' We put stickers on our NuWater system boxes, so even if homeowners don't know who their installer is, they can go to the website and get information on their system."

KEEP THEM HAPPY

Whether dealing with builders, real estate agents or homeowners, Cyclone Septics team members aim to stand out with superior service. "We try to treat people the way we would want to be treated," Dawn says. "Michael is a very nice guy. He bends over backwards to help people out.

"We all strive to keep all the customers happy. That means we return phone calls. If somebody calls me with a problem and it's a simple issue, I'm going to walk them through it over the phone, rather than charge for a service call and send a technician to take care of something that can be fixed in five minutes.

"We don't want to be going back to work on systems we install. That doesn't make people happy, and it doesn't make us money. We make sure everything is done right the first time. We talk to our customers so they understand their system — how it works and what needs to be done on it.

"I feel comfortable saying we have the most informative website of any installer in Oklahoma. We try to cover all the bases on what any homeowner would want to know. If people understand their systems, then they're more likely to realize how to take care of them: what to do and what not to do."

Oklahoma requires every onsite system to have a two-year warranty, and for aerobic systems a two-year maintenance contract is mandatory. Cyclone offers maintenance plans that include two visits per year and strongly urges homeowners to continue with regular maintenance after the initial two years have passed.

MACHINE MATTERS

For installations, Cyclone uses a variety of equipment. The inventory includes:

- 2015 and 2013 John Deere 50G excavators
- 2014, 2013 and 2011 Ditch Witch RT 24 trenchers
- 2016 and 2015 John Deere HH20 hammers for breaking rock
- 2007 Bobcat S205 skid-steer
- 2001 Sterling and 2005 Kenworth rail trucks
- 2014 Kenworth knuckle-boom truck
- Six Chevy pickups from model years 2002 to 2020

On the manufacturing side, a 1965 Caterpillar 988A front-end loader does heavy duty pulling cast tanks out of the molds.

Installers let builders and homeowners know what to expect from heavy equipment on sites. “We try to be very clear that this is heavy equipment we’re moving into their yard,” says Dawn. “The tanks weigh about 20,000 pounds; you put that on a truck and it’s going to leave ruts. We let them know they’ll have dirt in their yard and it will be muddy if it rains.”

Cyclone team members smooth the site on completion but generally leave the landscaping to the builder or the homeowner.

SERVE THE INDUSTRY

While growing the business, Dawn and Michael are working to raise the standards for onsite systems in their state. Dawn serves on the board of directors of the Oklahoma Onsite Wastewater Association, which is working with the Department of Environmental Quality on a variety of issues.

The association is advocating for a law requiring pre-sale onsite system inspections and to tighten inspection requirements. “Right now, the state allows home inspectors to do the septic inspections, but they are not trained in specific septic issues,” says Dawn.

Another aim is to tighten licensing requirements. At present, anyone in Oklahoma can install septic systems without being licensed as long as the Department of Health Services inspects them. “That includes homeowners, and it includes installers who don’t want to mess with inspections,” Dawn says.

“They can do up to 12 systems a year without being licensed. It is really causing some issues with the quality of systems that are going in. We don’t want to make it overly difficult for people to get licensed, but we do think that for the benefit of the general public there needs to be a little more regulation on installers.”

A more professional onsite industry can only mean good things for companies like Cyclone Septics and the customers they serve.