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White Plains electrical contractor celebrates 40 years

By DARWIN WEIGEL dweigel@somdnews.com

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From left, Tom Attick, his mother Lucille Attick and sister Traci Norris pose for a picture outside their White Plains business, C.H. Attick Electric Inc. The company is celebrating 40 years in business.

Staff photo by DARWIN WEIGEL

Electrical contractor C.H. Attick Electric Inc. of White Plains has kept it all in the family for 40 years.

Started in a Greenbelt basement in April of 1977 by Lucille Attick and her late husband Harry, who died in 2010, the commercial and industrial electrical contractor has been in their children's hands for the last 20 years. Traci Norris of Bryans Road and her brother Tom Attick bought the business in 1998 and Lucille stayed on as she could until last winter, though she said she'll still fill in when needed.

Looking back at the beginning, which started with a loan from friends Howard Rupard and his son Calvin — the C and H in the name — as well as a home remortgage, Lucille said it started out small but quickly grew into a strong business with 80 employees.



“It was a scary time. Just mortgaging your home and going and starting a new business,” Lucille said. “We worked out of the basement in our home for six years, and then we built this [White Plains] building.”

That was in 1983 and Lucille, who ran the office from top to bottom, was still doing payroll by hand.

“Back in the beginning, when we were really doing well, we had like 80 employees. It was back in the day when there were no computers,” she said of the payroll and bookkeeping work. “It was a lot of work.”

Changes in the industry led to a smaller workforce, which now numbers 18, and a move to what used to be all commercial work – retail, schools, office buildings – into heavier commercial and industrial work.

“It was office buildings and shopping centers and schools,” Tom said. “In the last 10 years we’ve switched to more industrial work: wastewater treatment plants, pump stations, gas work. It used to be all commercial and now it’s, volume-wise, probably 50/50.”

While the business has changed, the core group of employees have remained.

“In the last 20 years, it’s stayed pretty steady with this 18 [number]. It’s pretty much the same 18 folks, too,” Tom said. “A lot of the folks who were here 20 years ago are still here, or at least 15 years.”

“Patty, downstairs, she’s been here 32 years in June,” Traci added.

When they first bought the business from their parents, they had to weather a downturn in commercial contracting but managed to stay busy enough to keep most of their core group of employees. The siblings attributed that to location.

“We’re not recession-proof but we’re certainly in a lot better shape than the rest of the country,” Tom said about the amount of government-backed projects in the region. “This area has usually stayed pretty busy.”

A real boon for the business, aside from school construction and defense projects, has been wastewater treatment plant upgrades common in the last 10 years or so in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

“Marley-Taylor [Wastewater Treatment Plant] in Lexington Park was our biggest job ever by two or three times,” Tom

said. “It was larger than anything else we [had done].” They’ve also done the electrical construction work for upgrade projects in Anne Arundel, Calvert and Charles counties. And they’re currently working on a large pump station project under the Virginia side of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge across the Potomac River.

“The Huntington Levee project is a really interesting project. ... They’re building this levee that flows the water into a particular area, which is the pump station. The pump station pumps it back out into the [Potomac] River,” Tom said. “When it’s complete, if they designed it properly, that whole area (park and homes) will no longer flood. It’s a big Fairfax County (Va.) project.”

The company has done the electrical installation work for numerous buildings and schools in Charles County, as well, and has the contract for the upcoming Dr. Mudd Elementary School renovation.

“A hundred years ago, we did the Charles County Government Building,” Traci said with a laugh.

“You can drive around and point at that one and that one and that one,” Tom added.

Before and after moving the family down to Charles, Lucille and Harry did much of their work in Prince George’s County and even a hotel in Washington, D.C.

“We did the Maryland Trade Center in Greenbelt,” Lucille said. “That was a 16-story high-rise. We also did a hotel downtown – Tudor Hall (The Henley Park Hotel).”

All along the way, C.H. Attick Electric has participated in an apprentice electrician program, paying for the education of its employees, Lucille said. The program allows people to work during the day and attend classes – currently at North Point High School – in the evening twice a week for four years. They then become state certified.

“When they complete that, then they become a ‘mechanic.’ We do a fair amount of wage-scale work, so the projects that are state or federally funded dictate the wages,” Tom said. “Those wages are significantly higher than normal construction wages. If the employee is in school and registered with the state of Maryland, then they’re eligible for those wages as well.”

“We currently have four apprentices, and one’s getting ready to graduate,” Traci said.

“It’s a nice feature that we offer, and it benefits us, too,” Lucille added.

While Traci is eyeing retirement after 40 years – she and Tom both have worked in the company since high school and

while going to college — Tom said he's looking forward to the future.

“We're looking forward to continuing the direction that dad put us on,” Tom said.

“We've been very fortunate. We've been blessed,” Lucille said. “I'm very proud of Tommy and Traci for taking over and making us successful. I'm very proud of both of them.”

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