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A Great Journey



Maryland's Freedom Septic started off with an old truck and a dream — 30 years later the dream is a reality

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A Great Journey



Maryland's Freedom Septic started off with an old truck and a dream — 30 years later the dream is a reality

By Betty Dageforde



Freedom Septic Service

Eldersburg, Maryland

OWNERS: Bruce and Michael Bopst

FOUNDED: 1990

EMPLOYEES: 15

SERVICE AREA: Five counties, 100-mile radius

SERVICES: Septic service and installing, portable sanitation

WEBSITE: www.poophappens.com

Brothers Bruce and Michael Bopst got into the septic service business in 1990 and over the years developed a good feel for how much work and what services produce good results for their situation.

They don't try to be all things to all people. They added installations but avoid pumping grease traps. They offer portable restrooms but stay away from large festivals and concerts.

Striking the perfect balance between having enough work to keep everyone busy but not so much that people are run ragged requires constant monitoring. More work doesn't always translate into more profit because expenses may also go up.

The company, Freedom Septic Service, is located in Eldersburg, Maryland, about 30 miles west of Baltimore. The service territory covers five counties, about a 100-mile radius. They operate out of several buildings on a 1-acre property.

Staff includes four septic service technicians, two installation crew members and six portable restroom technicians. Office manager Christy Sheubrooks and Kasey Harrison handle office matters. The company is available 24 hours a day and it's Bruce's wife Jody who takes the after-hours calls along with daughter Bridget, a schoolteacher who helps out when she can. Michael is more of a silent partner these days but is involved in business decisions and always helps whenever needed.



✎ Bruce and Michael Bopst are surrounded by the crew of Freedom Septic, from left, Joey Flanders, Jordan Miles, Ken Walk, Christy Sheubrooks, Simone Saddler, Andrew Myer, Irving Rodriguez, Harry Poehlitz, Bradley Peach, Dustin Dolly, Susan Flanders, Lou Gepes, Carlos Aponte-Rivera, John Green and Dan Farrow. The truck behind them is a Peterbilt from Pik Rite and carrying a Jurop/Chandler pump. (Photos by John Boal)



“ WE HAVE ALL THE BAD STUFF — WATER TABLE PROBLEMS, ROCK PROBLEMS BECAUSE WE’RE CLOSE TO THE MOUNTAINS, WE HAVE CLAY ... WHAT I TELL MY GUYS IS IF IT WAS EASY EVERYBODY WOULD DO IT. ”

BRUCE BOPST

A TRUCK AND A FILE CABINET

In 1990 the brothers were working for their father’s trucking company, Charles Bopst Trucking, when their father’s neighbor approached them about buying his septic business — basically one vacuum truck and a client list. At first Bruce wasn’t too excited about it since he had just gotten married and bought a house, but Michael was interested.

“I’d seen septic trucks running around and thought that’s got to be a good business and something we could get into and make a couple dollars because we knew trucks,” Michael recalls. After the deal was made, they discovered the neighbor didn’t have quite as much work as he represented, so it was tough going in the beginning. The brothers worked days at the trucking company and nights and weekends pumping. Eventually the business grew enough that Bruce went full time with it. Michael stayed on with the trucking company.

By 1994 they hired someone to do pumping, bought a backhoe, and began installing systems. Bruce realized it didn’t make sense to subcontract that work out when he had the expertise to do it himself. A few years later they added portable restrooms.

“I just thought, if you’re going to do this business, you’ve got to do all aspects,” Bruce says. “I bought a flatbed truck, installed a tank on it myself and bought a truckload of portable toilets — 28 of them.” Again, it was slow

going so he enlisted Michael’s help and both were back to working a lot of hours. Eventually builders started renting their units. “Then it took off to the point we ended up having to get a driver to help me with that, but then I had to buy a better truck, too,” Bruce says.

PUMPING, ETC.

Pumping is still the mainstay of the business, Bruce says. Long-time employees Ken Walk and Irving Rodriguez oversee the division. About 90% of the work is for residential systems. The fleet includes a 1995 Peterbilt 365 built out by Imperial Industries with a 5,000-gallon steel tank and Masport pump, a 2005 International built out by Abernethy Welding & Repair with a 2,500-gallon steel tank and Masport pump, and four Peterbilt trucks (2012-18) built out by Pik Rite with 3,500-gallon and 5,000-gallon steel tanks and Jurop/Chandler and National Vacuum Equipment pumps.

The company has locators from Amazing Machinery and tank agitators from Crust Busters. They use RIDGID cameras for their own convenience but do not promote camera inspections as a service offering. They also don’t promote grease trap work, although they do retain a few accounts.

“If someone calls us, we’ll do it,” Bruce says. “But it’s a whole other thing to get into. Then you’ve got to have jetters and you’ve got to start cleaning lines.” Another expansion idea they rejected was working in Pennsylvania, only 20 miles away. They talked about it, Michael says, but decided it would just be too much — more trucks, different regulations.



✎ Technician Ken Walk pulls hose from his service truck before pumping a tank.

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Technician Jordan Miles services several PolyJohn restrooms using his Ford F-550 service truck from Imperial Industries and running a Masport pump.

Bruce Bopst sets up the railings on a Forest River restroom trailer.



Another long-time employee, Dan Farrow, works on the installation side along with Bruce. There is a wide range of soil and geographic conditions in their area so a variety of systems are used, Bruce says.

"We have all the bad stuff — water table problems, rock problems because we're close to the mountains, we have clay. That's why we do the drip systems, sand mounds, conventional, innovative, holding tanks, BAT (best available technology) systems. What I tell my guys is if it was easy everybody would do it." He jokes each job is a nightmare in its own way, whether it's a soil issue or maneuvering equipment over 10-foot walls or making repairs on property somebody's been building on for 30 years.

Commercial projects have included churches, a shopping center in Finksburg where they hired a crane to set a 10,000-gallon tank, and a children's camp. They've also done a number of nursing homes, which Bruce says require a lot of modern technology. "They're using medicine and flushing a lot of stuff down the toilets, which creates high nitrates in the ground," he says. "So you have to have different types of tanks to filter all that out before it hits the disposal area."

The company owns one Caterpillar mini-excavator, four Caterpillar backhoes, two JCB backhoes, two Caterpillar skid-loaders and three International dump trucks.

RED, WHITE AND BLUE

Joey Flanders and Lou Gepes head up portable sanitation. The company's 1,100 PolyJohn portable restrooms feature patriotic colors in keeping with the model name "Freedom" — blue units with red trim and white roof. Other equipment includes 50 PolyJohn hand-wash stations and 50 PolyJohn holding tanks. They also have one Ameri-Can Engineering and six Forest River restroom trailers, which Michael admits have been more popular than he originally expected.

“ WE TRY TO MAKE IT AS FUN AS POSSIBLE. I ALWAYS SAY WE WEREN'T BORN MILLIONAIRES SO WE HAVE TO WORK. YOU CAN'T BE MAD ABOUT BEING HERE, WE'VE GOT TO DO IT, SO WE TRY TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT. ”

BRUCE BOPST

"They've really taken off," he says. "Everybody's having outside weddings nowadays and we've also done political events in Baltimore. And sometimes a business redoes their restrooms so we take a trailer out for them." About 80% of their work is for construction accounts. Bruce prefers smaller events like cookouts, parties and weddings.

"It's a heckuva thing to say but we're a small company so I try to stay away from the really large events. It's too hard for us to pull off. We don't have the manpower. I'm a big believer in doing good service, and I don't want to do bad service just to try to do a big job." They provide units for turkey shoots, fireworks displays, county parks and Baltimore Orioles opening-day activities at several bars.

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The fleet includes a 2005 International built out by Abernethy with a 900-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater steel tank, a 2011 Ford F-550 with a 600-gallon waste/300-gallon freshwater steel tank from Progress Tank, four Ford F-550s (2014-2017) built out by Imperial with 600-gallon waste/300-gallon freshwater steel tanks, and two Ford F-550s (2018, 2019) built out by Imperial with 900-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater aluminum tanks. All have Masport pumps. Their deodorant products are from J&J Chemical, Surco Portable Sanitation Products and Walex Products. They also have a 2019 Chevy Silverado pickup with a Knapheide service body to deliver tools and supplies.

There's one company-built hauling trailer but they often use their four Chevrolet and Ford flatbed trucks with liftgates. "In a lot of the situations it's hard to get a trailer in," Bruce explains. "With a flatbed we can get them in and out pretty quick in just about any situation."

NOT BORN RICH

One of the most enjoyable aspects of the business for Bruce these days is just being with the guys, joking and laughing. "We try to make it as fun as possible," he says. "I always say we weren't born millionaires so we have to work. You can't be mad about being here, we've got to do it, so we try to make the best of it. Cutting up and joking around, that probably keeps you going more than anything."

The employees seem to enjoy it as well, as many of them have been with the company a long time. Benefits include health insurance, paid holidays and a 401(k) plan. They don't have many formal meetings but the team meets informally every morning when everyone comes into the office to get their assignments. The company sponsors a Christmas party and a combined septic and trucking company catered summer party at Bruce's house.

Work slows down in the winter but they keep busy. "Whatever we've been breaking all summer long and were too busy to fix, we fool with in the winter," Bruce says. They also do snow removal and equipment maintenance.



Operator Dan Farrow uses a Cat backhoe to dig a trench for a new septic system.

Technician Brad Peach prepares to lay PVC pipe in a trench during a system installation.



MORE INFO

Abernethy Welding & Repair, Inc.
800-545-0324
www.abernethywelding.com

Amazing Machinery, LLC
800-504-7435
www.amazingmachinery.com

Ameri-Can Engineering
574-892-5151
www.ameri-can.com

Chandler Equipment
800-342-0887
www.chandlerequipment.com

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www.crustbusters.com
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www.forestriverinc.com

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Imperial Industries, Inc.
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www.imperialind.com
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800-345-3303
www.jjchem.com

The Knapheide Mfg Co
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www.polyjohn.com
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RIDGID
800-474-3443
www.ridgid.com

Surco Portable Sanitation Products
800-556-0111
www.surco.com
Ad on pages 80, 81

Walex Products Company
800-338-3155
www.walex.com
Ad on page 37



Ken Walk looks into an inspection port before setting up for a residential pumping job.

HARD WORK, GOOD HELP

In 2019 the company won a Best of Carroll County Award in the septic division for the fourth time in recent years, a contest sponsored by the Carroll County Times. Bruce says he doesn't know who votes or what the criteria is — "But we do good work, I know that," he says. He's also quick to add it's sometimes their competition who wins, so it keeps everybody on their toes.

Bruce believes anyone can succeed if they work hard enough — and have good help. "You're only as good as your help," he says. "I'm a firm believer in that. I can't do it all any more. There was a day I could, but it comes to a point when you get a company this size, you cannot do it yourself. That's very important."

Controlled growth will continue to be the operating plan for the future, Bruce says. "I'm where I want to be. We turn down work but it's because I don't want to get bigger. It's just so hard to find the help and keep control and do good work. I'm pretty happy where I'm at right now." **P**



Keep on truckin'

Bruce Bopst says
Freedom Septic

Service's first septic truck has now gone to the happy pumping ground, but he continues to hang on to its replacement, the 1995 Peterbilt 365.

"I keep wanting to sell it," he says, "but I look at it and I'm having a hard time selling it because I drove that truck myself for a long time." Imperial Industries found the used truck for him and put the 5,000-gallon steel tank on it. The vehicle is still insured and certified in all the counties the company works in and continues to be put to good use.

"It's getting old but I've always

taken care of my equipment," Bruce says. "It's one of those things that if you take care of it, it'll take care of you." The company facility has a three-bay garage where Bruce services all the company's vehicles when he's not operating a backhoe, bidding jobs or doing percolation tests. "I do all the mechanical work," he says. "I change the tires, change the oil, do the grease jobs."

Bruce is committed to keeping the fleet updated, and doesn't necessarily hold onto old stuff, but there's no question he has a soft spot for the service truck that helped him get the business off the ground.