

► STRETCHING THE POINT

Tommy Garner Air Conditioning and Heating: 30 years of meeting challenges

By Jennifer L. Williams

An apprenticeship in the heating and air conditioning business led to a lifetime love affair with the industry for Tommy Garner.

The president and owner of Tommy Garner Air Conditioning and Heating found his niche and has become a lifelong learner in the business.

Family friend and Glendale neighbor Terry Johnson, vice president of HVAC contractor Art Newsome in Newport News, offered Garner the apprenticeship with his company.

"It was an industry that was challenging," Garner says. "You were always doing something different. Every day you didn't know what challenge you were going to face. So I loved it."

After completing the apprenticeship, Garner worked for other companies before losing his job in 1986. He had \$200 in savings, had just gotten married and bought a house, his wife was in college and they started in business.

"It'll be 30 years on September 8 of this year," Garner says, sitting in his

office surrounded by photos of his son and daughter.

Garner does all different parts of the trade, including electrical, plumbing, gas fitting and mechanical. He also does some construction.

He likes a challenge, and says problem solving is the company's specialty.

"Most people can install heating and air, but when it comes to a problem or something out of the ordinary—they walk away," Garner says. "And I'm the guy who likes to go in and try to figure it out. And that's what we are based on. We are a service-based company, solving problems and doing quality work."

Garner says the company seldom advertises and has grown over the years based on word of mouth in the community.

The company was originally housed in part of a building in Hilton Village, and was later located in front of Christopher Newport University (CNU) before construction forced its



Tommy Garner, president and owner of Tommy Garner Air Conditioning and Heating

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relocation a little further up in the Hiddenwood area of Newport News.

Garner is a Newport News native, and stays involved in the community. His biggest love is the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Virginia Peninsula, which he says he grew up in as a youngster.

"I built so many relationships at the Boys & Girls Clubs," Garner says. "You remember that. And as I've gotten older and gotten to the point where I can give back, I've tried to give back. I'd like to do more in the future."

He is also very involved with Warwick Yacht and Country Club, serves on the board of the Virginia Living Museum, drives a truck to pull a float at Menchville High School's homecoming each year and is on a committee for CNU's Comprehensive Capital Campaign.

Garner believes in supporting the Peninsula, but also the country itself. Tommy Garner Air Conditioning and Heating makes a concerted effort to use U.S.-made products and equipment whenever possible, he says.

As the economy has ebbed and flowed over the years, Garner says his business has steadily grown, and he's made every effort to stay up to date. Approximately 70 percent of his customers are commercial and 30 percent are residential.

"What's driven me is the fear of failure," Garner says. "You don't want to fail. Most businesses fail within the first seven years."

"So you take classes, you read, you do whatever you can to stay up. And basically it's hard work, good ethics, just making sure you're not taking advantage of customers and growing your business based on word of mouth."

He credits the chance that Johnson gave him and the training he provided early on as the foundation.

"I love heating and air," Garner said. "Every day I get up ready for the new challenge." ◀

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