



LINDSAY ABSHAGEN/Herald photos

Keep on truckin'

Vandegrift Diesel in Durango earns trust over 30 years

No one wants to be here," said Todd Vandegrift, owner of Vandegrift Diesel. "Their vehicle is broken down, and they are stressed."

The repair industry has a "bad rap" that adds to that anxiety, said Todd's wife and partner Vicki. "You never know if mechanics are telling you the truth. There are shops that take advantage of people."

The Vandegrifts say their customers may come in a bit frazzled, but they leave with a feeling of trust. Honesty is what has sustained the business for 30 years in Durango.

The family-owned, 8,000-square-foot shop, located at 225 Turner Drive in Bodo Park in Durango, offers professional repair and maintenance services on all foreign and domestic trucks. The facility has several bays for different types of vehicle work, including public-transportation vehicles, the phone company's fleet, construction trucks and automobiles. The business is a certified Napa Truck Service Center and a dealer for National Interlock Services. They also offer welding, and repair air-conditioning systems and Western and Meyer snowplows.

Early in 1982, Todd Vandegrift and Pat Hanon formed Vandegrift & Hanon to provide vehicle maintenance and repairs for Mountain Bell. They soon expanded the business to work on other fleets, and took over management of the old Texaco service station at 17th and Main. As the clientele grew, the business moved to Bodo Park to a rented shop that now houses a restaurant. Hanon's life headed in another direction, so the partnership was dissolved, and the business became known as Vandegrift Diesel. Real estate was purchased in the southwest corner of Bodo, and the business moved into the new shop in February 1995, where it continues to operate.

Vandegrift said he has thought about closing a few times over the years, because Durango "is a tough town to make a living." He has persevered because he "wouldn't be happy doing anything else." The main challenges over three decades have been finding good employees, maintaining overhead costs and riding out the economic slump, which hit the construction industry hard. "But I'm optimistic to see the economy come back around," he said.

On a busy Monday morning June 11, the shop was clanging, banging and whirring with activity, and technicians had their hands deep in the innards of various vehicles. Vandegrift said in the old days he often fixed phone-company fleet vehicles late at night to have them ready to go the next morning. Now that he has five technicians, he misses doing the hands-on work; although there are some

Vicki Vandegrift, shown with her husband and partner Todd, says the key to business longevity is perseverance — aka "not knowing when to throw in the towel."



very specific A/C systems that only he knows how to repair.

"I'd work in the shop more if I could. As an owner, you have to delegate, do the paperwork and greet customers."

But Vandegrift still finds plenty of work to do. As he walks into the shop office, his wife Vicki grabs his elbow and inspects it. "You're already dirty," she says. They exchange a look and laugh.

The couple has been married 35 years. Todd said the key to working with a spouse is a clear delineation of duties: He is the principal of the day-to-day operations and she does the bookkeeping.

"You've got to have patience and a good sense of humor to work with family. You have to understand each other," said Todd. "I can be a jerk some days."

Vicki says one way to maintain harmony in a business/personal partnership is to pursue individual interests outside the workplace. For spouses who work in different businesses, Vicki says it's important to be with and discuss the day with other family members; but the Vandegrifts tend to separate for a few hours in the evening. Todd maintains a huge garden with his dad, and Vicki spends many hours a week doing Jazzercise.

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- Todd Vandegrift

"It's hard not to bring home the stresses of the day," said Vicki, "but we try to limit work discussions to the office."

They raised three sons, who spent most of their childhood in the shop. The oldest, Jeremy, remains in the industry as a fleet analyst for Jefferson County in Golden. Nathan received a mechanical engineering degree from CSU and is a product engineer for John Deere in Waterloo, Iowa. Alex, the youngest, will also graduate from CSU in mechanical engineering and is currently serving an internship with John Deere in Dubuque, Iowa.

Todd is clearly proud of his sons, and said he is glad they learned a trade at a young age that led to mechanical careers. There's a family joke around their sons' career ambitions.

"We always complained about engineers needing to get their hands on an engine to realize how hard it can be to fix it. Now that we have one in the family, we're hoping to create a better breed of engineer."

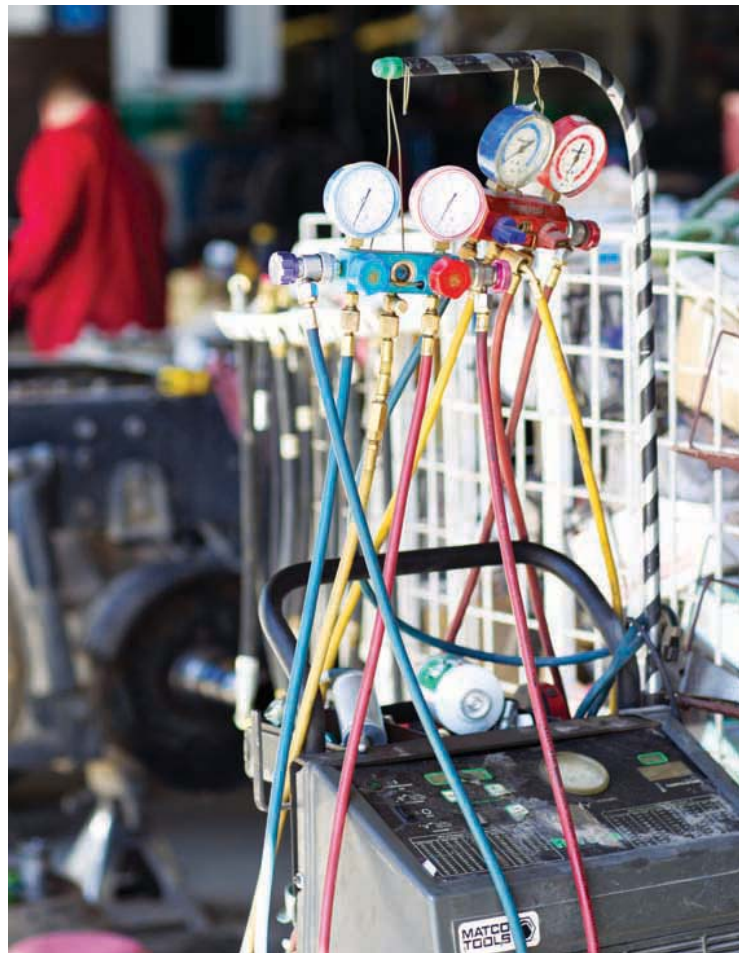
Todd doesn't plan to retire for another 10 years, but they hope to keep the business going through employees. Their sons aren't interested, Vicki said, because they have good-paying jobs they enjoy.

"Our retirement plan includes borrowing money from them later on," said Todd, chuckling.

Vicki pondered the secret to business longevity for a moment.

"It's perseverance and stubbornness – and not knowing when to throw in the towel. At this point, we're pretty sure we wouldn't be able to find a job as personally rewarding as this – even on bad days.

"This business has thrived all these years due to the hard work of its owners, committed employees who are pretty much considered family, and great customers." ❖



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