

inc. Innovators

A weekly look at Fox Valley up-and-comers and trendsetters

Neenah business takes on dirty jobs

Brent Radtke logs hours, sacrifice to get chimney service off the ground

By Maureen Wallenfang
Post-Crescent staff writer

"Chim chiminey, chim chiminey, chim chim cher-oo. Good luck will rub off when I shake 'ands with you." — line from the chimney sweep song in 1964 movie "Mary Poppins"

Q "Mary Poppins" was a popular movie before you were born that included dancing chimney sweeps. Have you seen it?

A Oh yes, I have seen it. There are even wholesalers where I can purchase white gloves and top hats and figurines. I think it was a marketing tool.

Q Do people start singing "chim chiminey" when they meet you?

A Some will ask if I brought my top hat and if I'm going to float up there.

Q How is your profession different from that romantic image?

A I tell people you can't be proud to do this line of work because we do get dirty. In fact, it was a segment on "Dirty Jobs" on the Discovery Channel. You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and crawl right in there.

Q What do you like about the job?

A I'm fascinated with the construction business. I can learn what I want to learn. You get a sense of accomplishment. I'm not opposed to working hard.

Q What else do you offer besides chimney sweeping?

A Anything and everything with chimneys and fireplaces. Heating and venting systems. Maintenance. Relining, rebuilding, relining, replacing. There's nothing we don't do. Our bread and butter is chimney related. We do dryer venting and duct cleaning.

Q How is the business going?

A Extremely well. We're approaching the end of our first full year. Our first full year, we did a little over \$150,000 in business. I've only been in the phone book since July and the AT&T book since September. All of the work we were doing was word of mouth. This fall was a little disappointing as far as the sweeps go. It's a little scary. Because of the economy, I think people are putting off a lot of things they should have done.

Q How do you know if you need to have your chimney cleaned?

A The National Fire Protection Association claims anything over an eighth inch of creosote buildup should require cleaning and servicing. Basically, if you've never had it done, you should have it done. If you can't remember the last time you had it done, it's time.

Q What about those creosote cleaning logs?

A I wouldn't recommend purchasing any products except from a chimney profes-



BRENT RADTKE cleans a chimney of a Neenah home. Radtke owns Radtke Chimneys, a Neenah-based business that focuses on servicing anything related to chimneys and fireplaces.

Brent Radtke

Title: Chimney sweep and owner of Radtke Chimneys in Neenah

Web site: www.radtkechimneys.com

Started business: July 2007

Radtke's background: Age 27; Neenah native and resident; attended University of Wisconsin-Platteville and pursued a degree in physical education; worked as a chimney sweep for another local company before starting on his own.

Employees: One full time and one part time

sional. We deal with professional wholesalers who will have the best of the best. I have proven products, warranted products.

Q What are the dangers of creosote?

A There were an average of 25,000 fires a year in the last five years. There were 30 deaths due to (chimney) fires every year in the last few years. I don't tell customers those figures because I don't like to use scare tactics.

Q What does it cost?

A The average price in the Valley is probably about \$165 to \$175. I'm \$145 for a complete sweep and inspection.

Q Why not charge the same?

A I need to get my foot in the door. Sweep and inspection is a repeat business. I realize this is a building process. Hopefully, I can tell you in five years it was well worth it.

Q How much time do you spend on the administrative side?

A Usually every night until I go to bed. I haven't taken a vacation all year. My employees were sometimes peaking at 48 hours a week. You can add 25 hours to that

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MAINTENANCE

"I don't want to scare anyone, but so many people do upkeep on their home, their vehicle, their furnace. But for whatever reason, the fireplace is out of sight, out of mind. It can tend to be overlooked."

for myself because I get the trucks ready. I do the sales, the proposals, the paperwork, the invoices.

Q Do you do the sweeping?

A I do all of the work. I'm on 95 percent of all the jobs. The employees are assisting me.

Q Are you taking a paycheck?

A I haven't taken a withdrawal. I haven't paid myself a dime. My wife makes \$11 an hour and we do quite well. I use my father's garage. We live in an apartment. I don't have cable TV. I'll start taking a paycheck now that my son is on his way. My wife is 8 1/2 months pregnant.

Q Even though your overhead is low, you still had to take a loan for equipment, trucks and employee paychecks?

A And it's great to say I only have about \$20,000 left on that loan, including the vehicles. I did it quite well shopping around (for equipment). I rented a second truck from my father. I didn't have employees for the first six months in business. It was a complete blessing that my father leant a second hand. He did not take a paycheck. I couldn't have done it without him.

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Monday, December 22, 2008

75
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