



HVAC has changed dramatically over the years, but the business of taking care of customers hasn't for these local businesses.

The Heartbeat

by Darin White, photos by Steven Hertzog

In the cold of winter while sitting at La Prima Taza, I realize how thankful I am for the modern convenience of heating. African American inventor Alice H. Parker filed a patent for a special type of heating device around 1919, her design a forerunner to modern, central heating and HVAC systems.

Systems that included heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) weren't common in residential homes until the 1970s, when they began to be built in. By the 1980s, well over 50 percent of the homes in the U.S. had air-conditioning, and a quarter had central air, according to the article "Explaining the Spread of Residential Air Conditioning, 1955–1980," by Jeff Biddle, in the online bibliographic database Science Direct.

In our comfort-driven society, it is hard to comprehend that people before this time were cold in Lawrence's once-harsh winters and sweating it out in the brutal summers.

There are many different options for HVAC and climate-control companies in Lawrence. A number of the larger independent operations have been purchased by big conglomerates in the last several years. Here is a look at two local HVAC companies that provide high-quality residential service to Lawrence: Absolute Air Heating & Air Conditioning, owned by Glenn Kipp, and BlueStem Heating & Cooling, owned by Jason Fisher and wife, Rebecca McAnulla.

Absolute Comfort

Glenn Kipp got his start working at a wholesale house for plumbing, electrical and HVAC in Manhattan, Kansas. His interactions selling to professionals gave him a partial understanding of the parts and materials, and an overall understanding of the trade. Kipp's father-in-law at the time offered him a job at his plumbing and HVAC company so he could learn the trade through hands-on experience, which he accepted.

He says his father-in-law was an "old-school soul," and if there was a part that was broken on a computer board, he would take it to the shop and solder it rather than pay to purchase a new one. Hands-on training is how Kipp learned the trade, which was good for him being he learns well through direct experience. He was well-educated and taught how to do things the



of the House

right way the first time, he says. As he was taught, Kipp says he also prefers "to repair if possible, and to do this, it requires getting to the root of what caused the problem."

As with any business, there are challenges. Besides the expense of the tools and equipment when he got started, "I'd say the biggest challenge would be keeping up with the ever-changing technology so as not to get left behind," he says. Through Absolute Air, Kipp has found that people will wait a day or two to get the heater fixed, but they want the air-conditioner fixed right away.

He says he has really enjoyed HVAC—working with his hands, fixing things and being on the go and interacting with people. He later moved to another company for a number of years in plumbing and HVAC, but eventually went out on his own almost 10 years ago and has been working in the industry for 30 years.

Kipp moved his business to Lawrence three years ago while maintaining clients in Manhattan and has been steadily increasing his clientele in Lawrence. His previous employer may take over his client load at some point so he can forgo the hour plus drive west.

He is open to growing Absolute Air more in Lawrence but wants to make sure whomever he hires will treat clients well and take care of them like he would. He is interested investing long term in an employee who would

potentially take over the company when he retires.

"I'm looking for not just an employee who is knowledgeable but someone with passion for what they do and who will treat my customers the way I do," Kipp explains. "All of my customers are treated with respect and not as a number, like some bigger companies do."

Currently, Absolute Air's main source of advertising is by Fabulux Media, which runs its website, and Google Ads. "My online presence also helps to get referrals and mentions. Such as the 'Live Love Local Lawrence' Facebook page, which has been a huge blessing." He says he's not only received numerous referrals from that page but now has lifelong customers from it, as well.

Word of mouth has been Kipp's most common source of advertising. "When you take good care of people, they will tell their friends and neighbors. As a smaller business, I can have a more personalized approach to my service that many bigger businesses just can't provide. For me, it's all about the customer experience and providing them quality service."

Besides Absolute Air working directly with home owners, he is grateful to have a number of property-management companies with whom he works, as well. And between those patrons and real estate companies, he stays quite busy.

Kipp holds a mechanical license and also offers water heater replacement.



Jason Fisher owner of Bluestem Heating and Cooling checking the dual capacitor on the York AC condenser getting it ready for the cooling season
Group photo of Bluestem Heating & Cooling pictured left to right: Joey Downing, Debbie Knudsen, Jason Fisher, Rebecca McAnulla, Jerry Ward
Jason Fisher checking the dual capacitor on the York AC condenser getting it ready for the cooling season



But, "I usually tend to refer them to a great plumber, John Durino [with Durino Plumbing], who I know will take good care of them." He has also worked with light commercial clients, but as a small, one-man operation, he's found that he is better-suited to residential work and will leave the commercial work to the larger commercial operations.

"Anyone considering the HVAC trade: Be prepared to work hard, but try and enjoy what you're doing. It's a satisfying career, and you will get out of it what you put into it. Be eager to learn and listen to anyone who can help you grow your knowledge. Some technical training would be very helpful, but if a person is willing to work hard and learn on the job, schooling isn't always the only way," Kipp explains.

Supporting the Family

Jason Fisher, with Bluestem Heating & Cooling, has been working in HVAC around Lawrence for 25 years, many of those as a service manager for another local company. He first got into the HVAC business when his wife, Rebecca McAnulla, and he were first starting a family. "I knew I needed a career that could support our family long term," he says. "I had always worked with my hands, and I liked figuring out how things work. HVAC felt like something I could really learn and grow into. Once I started, it stuck."

While Fisher has been working in the industry for a long time, the company is just celebrating its one-year anniversary. "Bluestem started during a time when my wife, Rebecca, and I were both at a crossroads. We spent many evenings talking things through as a family, brainstorming names and thinking about what kind of company we wanted to build. We didn't want something flashy. We wanted something local, dependable and built the right way."

He says the name Bluestem comes from their Kansas roots. As lifelong Kansans, the couple wanted the business to reflect that sense of home and stability. They are both fully involved in the day-to-day of the business, from communication to operations.

"It's truly something we're building together with the help of our family and team behind us," Fisher explains. "We didn't start Bluestem to be the biggest company in the area. We started it to be the one people feel comfortable calling."

Bluestem offers repairs for heating and cooling, entire system replacements, indoor air-quality services and ongoing maintenance plans with the goal of helping homeowners stay comfortable through every season. The vast majority of people don't think about HVAC until it stops working, as it is considered as part of a functioning home that, if maintained and working properly, should run quietly in the background. Fisher says the company's goal is to make comfort feel simple.



Glenn Kipp, Absolute Air Heating & Air Conditioning

Bluestem's clientele includes residential and light commercial companies, with an eye toward providing service to homeowners, small businesses and families who want a local team they can trust. One of the most important elements in their company: "Trust matters more than anything. People are inviting you into their home, and that's personal. Being honest, explaining things clearly and standing behind your work goes a long way. If you treat people right, they remember that," Fisher explains.

He understands that HVAC work can be very challenging, working in extreme temperatures with long hours taking care of customers who prefer the work is done quickly. "What I enjoy is being able to fix the problem and just know that I did my small part to make someone's day just a little bit better," he says.

Growth is something Bluestem is working toward. "We want to grow in a way that we can still provide the excellent customer service that has made Bluestem trusted in so many homes already," Fisher says. "We want to keep the personal touch and family feel for our Bluestem team and our customers. Keeping a good reputation and a great customer experience is more important to us than growing fast."

Since Fisher has worked in Douglas County a long time and has met a lot of great people through his work, much of Bluestem's work comes from referrals and repeat customers. "When someone has a good experience, they usually pass your name along, and that means a lot to us," he says.

Fisher believes Lawrence is fortunate to have The Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center (Peaslee Tech) in town, a good starting point for those interested in getting into the trade of HVAC. "Beyond that, it's about showing up, listening and caring about doing the job right. You don't have to know everything on Day 1. You just have to be willing to learn."

The trades are as important as ever, and there is a huge demand for new laborers and those who enjoy working with their hands, solving problems and taking care of individuals. HVAC is one of those trades that provides a specialized service people need and will continue to require for many years to come. Through technology and ingenuity, who knows where it will lead next. ▲



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