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Not Just a

by Bob Luder, photos provided by businesses

Plumbing is an essential trade in today's society that won't be vanishing anytime soon, not even with the proliferation of AI.

The angst is palpable. Two simple letters, AI, send shivers down the spines of countless employees and laborers wondering if and when artificial intelligence will grow so advanced it renders their occupations and means of making a living obsolete. Many fields—journalists, office assistants, accountants—already have experienced fallout from the existential threat of AI.

There seems to be at least one occupation, however, where laborers appear completely unfazed by emerging technology. As advanced as AI gets, it's highly likely it will never be able to repair a leaking water line. Or snake a drain, replace a water heater, install a water softener or remodel a bathroom.



Plumbers often weld large-scale steel-pipe configurations under controlled conditions in the fabrication shop before installation on the job site

Pipe Dream

No matter what the future—at least the near future—has in store, there always will be a need for plumbers.

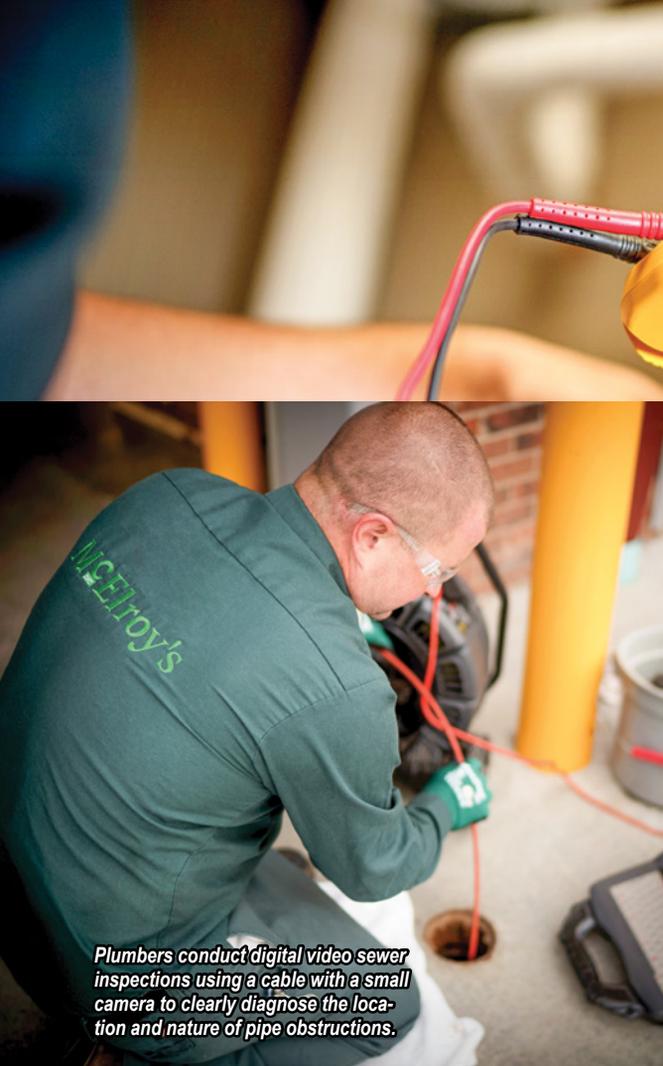
“There are simply certain things a robot is not going to be able to do,” says John Durino, who founded Durino Plumbing in 2021.

Fortunately for the Lawrence area, there are dozens of plumbing companies available to serve the needs of home and business owners ranging anywhere from large companies employing hundreds of plumbers all the way to one-person outfits running out of a single van. For instance, McElroy’s Inc., covers much of eastern Kansas, employs more than 100 plumbers and pipefitters during busy seasons, and handles mechanical, heating and air-conditioning in addition to plumbing.

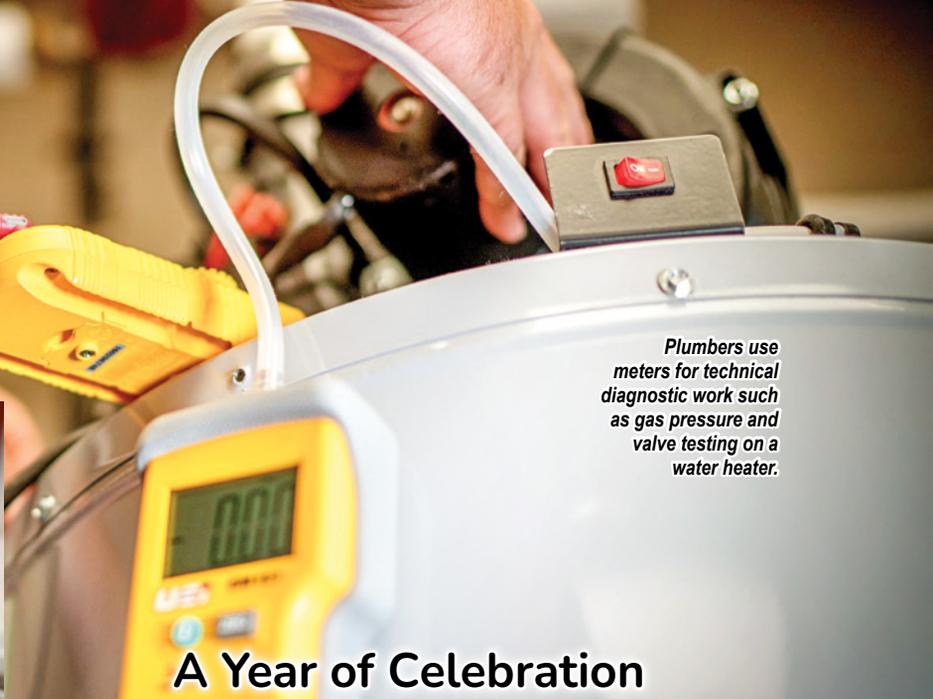
Then, there’s Rising Son Plumbing, in Lawrence since 2013 and owned and operated by Earl Moise out of his single van. In between, there’s Durino Plumbing, which has three plumbers covering a 30-mile radius around the city, and Advanced Plumbing Inc., which also employs two journeymen plumbers and an apprentice to help owners Chuck and Diane Folks handle plumbing needs of families and businesses in the northeast corner of the state.

Whatever Lawrence’s needs, there’s a plumber to take care of them. And, according to these plumbing companies and plumbers, no matter the level of local competition in the field, there’s plenty of business to be had.

“Lawrence is very competitive,” Moise says. “But there’s enough work here for everyone.”



Plumbers conduct digital video sewer inspections using a cable with a small camera to clearly diagnose the location and nature of pipe obstructions.



Plumbers use meters for technical diagnostic work such as gas pressure and valve testing on a water heater.

A Year of Celebration

McElroy's is a third-generation full-service mechanical contracting company that was founded in 1951 by Homer McElroy, continued by his son, Jerry McElroy in 1973 and led today by Jerry's son-in-law, Dan Beal. This year, the company is celebrating its 75th year of bringing customers exceptional service, craftsmanship and expertise.

Luke Dumler, McElroy's plumbing department manager, says the company has been doing an ever-increasing amount of business in Lawrence and surrounding areas. "Lawrence has been our biggest growth market in the last 10 years," Dumler says. "We do 30 to 40 percent of our plumbing business in Lawrence. We do a lot with (The University of Kansas). There's always work to be found."

Dumler emphasized work McElroy's did on the EcoFlow program in Lawrence in the late 20-teens, a project that went into many of the city's old homes and installed new plastic-fit sump pumps to contain and direct storm runoff, providing significant savings to the city in wastewater treatment and management. "The cost compared to building a new wastewater treatment plant was a drop in the bucket," Dumler says.

While McElroy's does some plumbing work for residences, its business depends on commercial work with large clients such as The University of Kansas (KU) and the city. "It's a lot easier to grow commercially," he says.

Lawrence's aging infrastructure, homes and business structures provide plenty of work even for the largest of the area's plumbing companies, but Dumler says a lot of business opportunities are occurring just to the east of town.

"The (Kansas Highway 10) corridor is just booming," he says. "The new Panasonic plant has just ignited all kinds of growth out that way. We want to try and jump in on all that."

Dumler says plumbing is a great trade for young people to pursue and says his company has started initiatives to get in front of more young people to let them know the benefits. Apprenticeship with a union lasts five years, with apprentices earning while they learn. A journeyman plumber can earn anywhere between \$70,000 to \$90,000 a year.

"It's a good field to be in," he says. "Journeyman wages are great, and by the time you're 50 or 55, you can be doing pretty well for yourself."

Dumler says his business is one that also is built for the long run.

"Thirty years from now, that guy who's been in the job for 30 years is more valuable than a young guy," he says. "The older you are, the longer you've been in the trade, the better you are and more valuable you are."

"Reputation and professionalism are what separate really good companies from ones that die off quick," Dumler adds.



Chuck Folks, owner of Advanced Plumbing, Inc.

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Born To Be a Plumber

Earl Moise gets emotional when it comes to answering a question about how he arrived at Rising Son as the name of his plumbing company.

"It's not me who picked it," Moise says. "I am a man of faith. I was living with my daughter and son in a small apartment, and we were trying to figure out what we were going to name it. Then, it just came to me in the middle of the night: Rising Son. I think it was divine intervention."

Rising Son has had an interesting evolution as a company during the last 13 years. Moise, a native of the island of St. Lucia who grew up in Brooklyn, New York, started with himself and one other plumber in 2013. The business eventually grew to include seven plumbers. But Moise found that finding and keeping good-quality help was difficult, and his company's quality control suffered.

He's been downsizing and tackling more of his company's work himself for a clientele that largely has been with him from Day 1 of Rising Son. He has one part-time employee and an office manager to handle scheduling and communications.

"I was juggling help and finding quality help," he says. "I decided I would rather take care of it myself and control the quality. I have help when I need it."

With an aging housing inventory and limited new-home construction in Lawrence, Moise says much of his work is remodeling—kitchens and bathrooms—and replacements of items like hot water tanks.

"Lawrence is competitive," he says. "But there's enough work for everyone. Everything right now is decaying. Everything has to be repaired or replaced. Everyone works well together."

Not only do plumbers appear immune from an AI takeover, Moise says the technology boom has proven useful to those in the field. "Technology in plumbing has changed a lot," he explains. "We've gotten a lot more efficient. We have cameras now that go in and spot blockages and breaks. A lot has changed."

One thing that hasn't changed over the 13 years Moise has been in the plumbing business is this: He loves what he does.

"I got into this business by accident, but I never regret it," he says. "It's been nothing but a blessing. Growing up in Brooklyn, I didn't want to go to college but wanted a trade. I remember a friend telling me to go back to college, but I said no way. I had found plumbing and loved it."

"What I love most is I'm a problem-solver. I can help people knowing that I love to solve their problems," he says.



Earl Moise, owner of Rising Son Plumbing.

Service Is King

Born and raised in Lyndon, Kansas, John Durino's first job was as a plumber's helper when he was in eighth grade. Plumbing has been in his blood ever since.

He and his family moved to Lawrence in 2016, the same year he earned his Master Plumber License, and five years later, he founded Durino Plumbing with the idea of keeping a narrow focus on the company's mission and what it's designed to do for customers. Much of Durino Plumbing's growth has come from repeat customers and referrals, a reflection of the trust the company has built in Lawrence homes.

With that in mind, Durino says the bread and butter of his company is service. The company does all service plumbing jobs except drain cleaning, such as faucets, toilets, waterline and drain line repair, and remodels. For specialized services such as drain cleaning, Durino partners with trusted local companies, allowing his team to remain focused on what it does best.

"We provide service different than anybody else," Durino says. "We want to be in their homes for the next 30 years. Our No. 1 priority is to take care of our customers. The most important thing to have is a building relationship."

Durino employs two other plumbers: Tony Votaw, a licensed journeyman, and Connor Vance, an apprentice.

Keeping his ship tight appears to be working. Durino says his company services about 2,800 customers, covering a 30-mile radius around Lawrence, and in 2024 brought in \$840,000 in gross revenue. "We never have a problem staying busy," he says.

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John Durino, and his team at Durino Plumbing (Photos by Kristol Kumar Photography)



“Just Plumb Smart”

Lifelong Douglas County resident Chuck Folks established Advanced Plumbing Inc. in 2008 with a mission of providing a comprehensive array of services with a small group of experienced plumbers. Folks, a master plumber, has three other plumbers—two journeymen and one apprentice—and wife, Diane, as office administrator but is not shy about tackling big jobs.

“We’ve had more of a focus on commercial work, but we’ve never turned down anything,” Folks says. “We’ve always done service, repair and everything else. There’s quite a bit of work (around Lawrence), and we have no trouble staying busy year-round.”

Both journeymen plumbers, Cory Delg and Ramiro Rosales, have been with Advanced for several years, and Folks, who got into plumbing as a young boy through his family and always has stressed a “family-first” motto at Advanced, knows he’s fortunate.

“We feel labor issues like everyone else,” he says. “I heard somewhere that, for every seven people coming out of (trade occupations), one is coming in. The average age for a tradesman is 45. With the dawn of IT (information technology), there are more computer jobs, more desk jobs.”

Folks says he sees a turn coming in recruitment for trade positions spurred by increasing salaries and promotion from celebrity tradespeople such as TV personality Mike Rowe. “I don’t know if we’re realizing (an upswing in people going into trades) quite yet, but we will in the next five to 10 years,” he says.

Folks says Advanced, which has as its motto “Just Plumb Smart,” has more than 3,000 customers from Lawrence to Topeka to Ottawa to Kansas City and all the smaller communities in between. The company deals in everything from drain cleaning, garbage disposals, gas line repair and installation, underground lines, water heaters, sewer lines and grease traps. It also is a prequalified program plumber for Lawrence’s EcoFlow program.

“It seems like there’s more work in some of the remote areas, which has led us to travel more,” he explains. “We’ve always done new repair work. But when it comes to new construction, we’ve had to travel more.”

Over the last few years, Folks says about 70 percent of his company’s work has been commercial, but today, it’s closer to 50/50 between commercial and residential. “I’d like to see it swing even more residential and local commercial jobs with local contractors,” he says.

Advanced Plumbing has two vans out on the Lawrence streets and Douglas County roads every day. The company also owns its own excavator for digging jobs and has connections to larger excavators if needed.

Folks says he’d like to one day get a few more trucks or vans but is fine with where his company is currently. “I like to get (plumbers) green and work them up,” he says. “That takes time. If it doesn’t happen, we’re doing OK.” ▲

Durino has also taken the scariness of AI and turned it on its head, leveraging the emerging tech to his company’s benefit. “There are certain things a robot is not going to be able to do,” he says. “We use AI to help with everyday busy things, like invoicing, billing, helping figure out the numbers. It’s like having a virtual (chief financial officer).”

And he sees great potential to expand the company in the coming years. Durino hopes to add one more plumber this year—he already has bought a van to accommodate that—and says that if, someday, he had 10 plumbers on board, he’d be fine with it.

He also says he couldn’t imagine a better community to start his business than Lawrence. “I believe Lawrence still has a small-town feel,” he says. “Everybody is connected. Word gets around. If you show up, follow up and charge a good price, people notice.

“It’s a great word-of-mouth town,” he continues. “And there’s no better way to honor me than by giving someone my name to help them.”

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