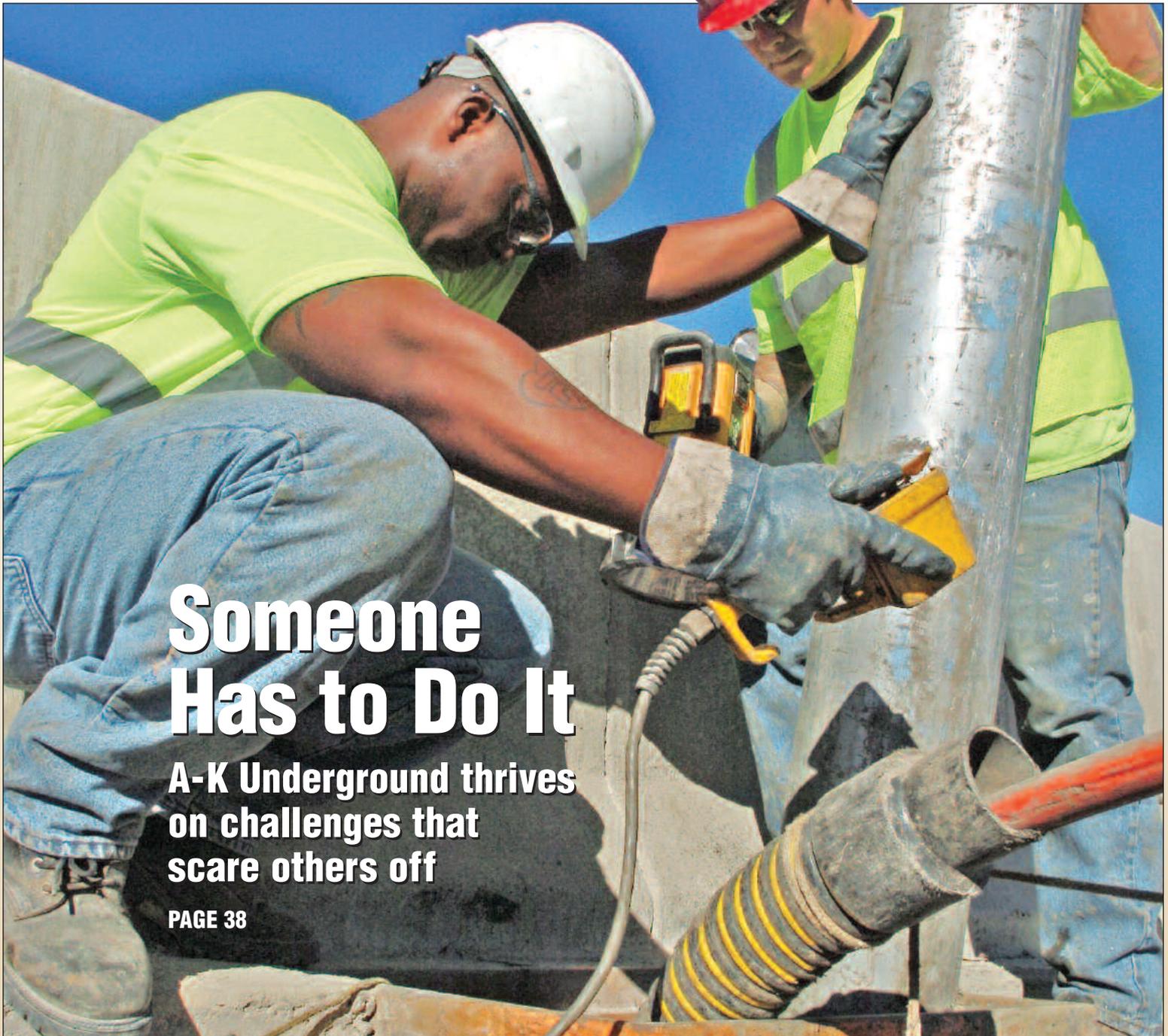


FOR RESIDENTIAL, MUNICIPAL AND INDUSTRIAL CLEANING CONTRACTORS

Cleaner®



Someone Has to Do It

A-K Underground thrives on challenges that scare others off

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Training employees for confined spaces

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Jetting truck from Kline's Services, Salunga, Pa.

Someone Has to Do It

A-K Underground has found and stuck to a niche in handling difficult, messy cleaning jobs that other contractors walk away from

By Mary Shafer

Al Kulig takes a straightforward approach to business. He brings the savvy of a sales position to the operational challenges of tough cleaning jobs.

Against conventional wisdom in an industry that encourages diversification, Kulig has found a profitable niche in truly difficult, sometimes disgusting jobs no one else wants.

A-K Underground, the business he owns with his wife, Karen, concentrates on clearing hopelessly clogged sewers, weirs, box culverts and other utilities. His strategy is to stay small and reap big rewards.

The accidental cleaner

“Not every job is complex,” says Kulig. “We might get called out to

clean the drain from a retention pond that isn’t draining, or from a contractor whose equipment knocked rocks down into a manhole and blocked it off.” Small, often simple jobs like these opened the door for A-K Underground to enter the cleaning business.

Kulig used to sell sewer cleaners and related equipment. In 1990, he sold an old, Vactor combination truck

to a friend. Five years later, the friend called, wanting to sell the truck back. “He also sold me \$100,000 worth of business, so I left my sales job and took it over. I got a VacAll street sweeper and modified it with a Vactor boom to clean out catch basins.”

This enabled Kulig to tackle more challenging jobs, and he began to get calls for small projects that didn’t interest larger competitors. “A lot of bigger contractors with the powerful equipment stay away from

the small jobs — the ones that take two hours up to one day, rather than two to three months,” Kulig says.

“We thrive on that. We didn’t want to go after the hyper-competitive government contracts, so we positioned ourselves to do smaller jobs well, and do them right. We found a lot of people complaining about jobs left half-done. We’ve never had a callback, unless it’s for additional work. I believe in no callbacks. We don’t leave until the

PROFILE

A-K UNDERGROUND TINLEY PARK, ILL.

OWNERS: Al and Karen Kulig
 FOUNDED: 1995
 SERVICE AREA: Metro Chicago
 EMPLOYEES: 6
 SPECIALTIES: Challenging drain, pipe and culvert cleaning jobs



Larry Jeffries (right) hydrojets a sewer line while Chuck Cushing checks on progress. The truck is parked several feet from the structure to allow room for viewing while jetting and vacuuming. (Photos by Dave Kenik)





Larry Jeffries operates the jetter on a combination unit as Chuck Cushing vacuums debris.

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Al Kulig

job is done. So I don’t schedule other jobs until the one we’re working on is complete.”

Long work days

It’s a tight juggling act that keeps Kulig hopping about 12 hours a day. “We have two or three crews going, so things stay busy,” he says. “I call ahead of time to schedule, so the customer knows when we’re coming. That keeps everybody happy. No one’s sitting around with a crew full of union workers, waiting for a truck to show. You do that once,

you’ll never get another call.”

A-K doesn’t do residential work. Thirty to 40 percent of its business is commercial and government contracts, and the rest consists of service to developers and apartment complexes.

Kulig’s sales background helps him win business as a contractor. “In sales, you’re always trying to please the customers and get in their heads to see what they need and want,” he says. “Then you try to perform when and where they want, within their budget. I transfer those

STAYING SAFE

Al Kulig demands constant attention to safety from his field crews. They wear hardhats and reflective vests on almost every job. “Sometimes it’s hard to get the guys to use safety glasses because they get dirty so quickly, but we stay after them,” he says. “It’s important.” Kulig himself was the cause of one safety addition.

“When lift stations are particularly deep, they’re so far from the vacuum tube that it can’t reach all the way, so you have to put a guy down there with confined-space entry equipment to shovel debris into the hose,” he says. “That can be dangerous. You really have to work with care, not to get arms or hands too close to the hose.

“We now use a vacuum brake when we’re a long distance from the hose, since one job where I got my arm caught in it. I was trying to shovel some debris into the vacuum tube, and a piece of garbage got caught in front of it. I went to grab it away from the tube, and my arm got sucked into it.

“It took almost two minutes to pull it away, and my arm was blue for two weeks. It was painful and made me nervous, since I’d had open heart surgery before that, and wasn’t supposed to stress my body.”

Blue arm and all, Kulig was soon back to work.



Owner Al Kulig (left) and operator Chuck Cushing discuss progress on an obstructed sewer line.

skills to what we do now.

“I’ve found customers appreciate a problem-solver. I try to come up with a solution, and then I keep that customer. Not only do you need to listen, but you’ve really got to hear what the customer’s not necessarily telling you. What’s the problem, short-term and long-term? How do you fill that void?”

To make sure he finds an answer, Kulig strategizes every job. “I plan with scratch pad and pencil,” he says. “I know what I have for capabilities and equipment, so I listen for what the problem is. I might go to look at the job in advance. I know what needs to be done, but not how long it’ll take. We bid those jobs on a time-and-materials basis.

Ready and willing

“You have to make sure you bring all the equipment and staff you might need. You don’t want to have your customer waiting for you to

finish the job so they can proceed with their project, and then have to admit you don’t have the right equipment.

“There may just be a dirty pipe or catch basin, but even on these apparently simple cleaning jobs, you might run into something unexpected. We keep three different nozzles on each truck to make sure we’re ready for whatever comes up.

“Like yesterday, a road had sunk in and we needed to televise the pipes underneath. It looked like liability all over the place. We had to put danger signs and cones everywhere just to be able to clean it, but we got it done and no one got hurt. If you take care of that kind of thing, you’ve got a friend, and that’s better than just a customer.”

Sometimes, pleasing a customer is a matter of being creative. “We’ve cleaned elevator shafts, and the hydraulic cylinders sometimes go bad and the hole would fill up with



An A-K Underground technician monitors a video inspection. (Photo courtesy of A-K Underground)

“I’ve found customers appreciate a problem-solver. I try to come up with a solution, and then I keep that customer. Not only do you need to listen, but you’ve really got to hear what the customer’s not necessarily telling you.”

Al Kulig

water and sand,” Kulig says. “So the workmen could get at those, we had to go down 30 or 40 feet and vacuum that out. I had put a hydroexcavating pump on one truck, so I could jet a line and excavate with the same vehicle. So we used that.

A-K’s equipment includes an Aquatech combination unit with a Robuschi vacuum powered by an FMC pump and jet rodder for large circumference cleaning; a Clean Earth (VacAll) combination truck with a Dresser Roots blower; and a Guzzler vacuum truck converted into a combination unit.

Formula for success

Equipment is only half of what it takes to do the job, and Kulig says the other half is in good shape at A-K Underground. “For some reason, I’ve found good help,” he says. “I call the union because those guys have their CDLs, have some apprenticeship in, and have some idea of what’s involved in the work. In Chicago, the money’s good, plus they get a pension and 100 percent

healthcare coverage. That’s a job worth showing up for. I believe it’s the money that attracts the kind of guys you want.”

Kulig can spot winning candidates quickly. “You can tell when you interview, or after a few days on the job, whether a guy’s into it or not,” he says. “Generally speaking, the guy should be over 30 and married or with a family, because he’s stable and wants to work. If he doesn’t work, he’s gone. I tried some 20-year-olds, but they weren’t ready to work. Drugs, alcohol and tardiness were real problems. If they’re like that, they’re not here. It’s too dangerous, and failures cost money.”

Dedicated crews are necessary to handle the tough assignments A-K Underground takes on. On one job, a contractor called the company to clear a 12- by 9- by 90-foot box culvert running beneath I-90, as part of a road improvement contract. The culvert was full of mud from two parallel creeks it spanned.

“We bid it as a per-linear-foot job,” Kulig says. “We had to divert the water with lumber and sandbags

into one culvert while we cleaned the other one. You wouldn’t believe what all was in there. There were tree branches, construction boulders, brush, debris, lots of garbage. We nearly lost a wheelbarrow and two shovels when there was a flash flood from a thunderstorm.

“We thought there was about a foot of mud in it, but it turned out there was actually 18 inches. We thought the job would take two weeks, but it took closer to four.”

Value added

Kulig prefers that his crews learn up front, without having to go through that kind of experience, so he stresses getting as much information as possible before work begins.

“My guys are all capable of carrying on an intelligent conversation with a client and figuring out a problem,” he says. “If you’re going to get to the heart of a problem, you’ve got to have dialogue. I tell them, ‘Don’t be afraid of the customer. Go talk to him, find out what he needs. You’re the one who’s going to make it better, so they’re depending on you. You have to appear confident, so they have confidence in you.’”

Kulig starts new hires by spending a couple of weeks on the truck with them, showing them the daily routine. “Once you start the task, the customer doesn’t bug you every minute,” says Kulig. “Soon the guys know what they’re supposed to do: initial assessment, job extent, technical stuff. I take care of the administrative work.”

Kulig keeps his eye on the industry, and has strong opinions about what is coming. “Hydroexcavation is going to get bigger, especially in the big city,” he says. “It helps you work in tight-packed utilities without piercing them the way an excavator

might. It minimizes physical and visible disruption, and it eliminates the time it takes for permits to cut curb. It ends up being a cheaper job, too, because you don’t have to rebuild everything you’ve destroyed.

“If I saw a young guy just getting started today, I’d tell him: No matter what you think you need for startup capital, figure three times that much. Everything has accelerated: insurance costs, vehicle registration, parts and labor, permits and licensing. Everything has gone up, and everyone has raised their prices to a great degree. You play with a lot of bucks, but not much of it sticks to you.”

And yet the success continues to stick to A-K Underground. ■

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