

# ALWAYS A BETTER WAY

Alan and Jen Chapin strive to elevate the onsite profession. Their approach is hiring quality people and providing community education.

By Ted J. Rulseh

Jen Chapin got an interesting introduction to her husband Alan's new onsite installation business. It was the day he brought home the equipment he had just bought.

"I said, 'You just quit your job. You drive up with a truck, trailer and Kubota in our driveway, and you're doing what?' And then, 'I guess you're going to need an office assistant.'"

That was 14 years ago. Today their company, Envirotek Septic Solutions on Washington's Camano Island, does a thriving business with 10 team members, providing installation and repairs, pumping and inspection.

Alan started the company with a vision for doing things differently — meaning better — than he had often observed after 17 years on the manufacturing, sales, design and management sides of the onsite industry. He had no hands-on installation experience but did have a desire to give every customer a high-quality system.

"I want to make sure the customers' systems last as long as possible," he says. "The only way to do that is to use better products and better methods of putting things together — making sure everything is done correctly."

That approach has bought excellent word-of-mouth and an abundance of repeat business. The customer connections are enhanced by the company's "On Septic" educational programs offered twice a month for homeowners, real estate agents and others in the company's training room.

## SEEING ALL SIDES

Alan Chapin started out after high school working in manufacturing with Orenco Systems in Sutherlin, Oregon. After five years, he moved to Washington and joined Orenco distributor HD Fowler. While there, he advanced from customer service to sales and ultimately management.

After three years, he moved back into sales, supplying the onsite installers who in many cases are now his competitors. In 1996, with his employer's permission, he earned a designer's license and began designing systems on the side.

By 2006 he was ready to launch a business. "I started inspecting and then immediately bought an excavator, a trailer and a truck and went right



▲ At a regular morning meeting with the team, Alan Chapin talks about a Geoflow spin filter. (Photos by Stephen Brashear)



▼ Alan Chapin connects tubing with a Netafim USA coupling, while installing an OSCAR coil system from Lowridge Onsite Technologies.

into installing,” he says. “I had experience with all the products, and I had experience watching guys doing the work in the field. I just basically said, ‘I can do that.’”

Meanwhile, a friend and former customer was moving to Arizona; Alan was able to take over his accounts. “That gave me a foot in the door to have some business right away. He showed me how to do installations; I learned from him before he moved away.”

The business took off quickly, Jen recalls: “We created an office in the house. We became so busy that I had to quit my physical therapy assistant job to help run the business. About three years into it, we started hiring employees.”

Today the team includes Kim Mahoney, chief operations officer; Monte Larsen, lead pumper; Chris Hinds, pump technician; Kale Klizke, lead installer; Cruz Griffin, install technician; Michele Thompson, bookkeeper; and Pam Murdoch, agreement services. They also have a new hire: Angie Hines, customer service/bookkeeper.



## Envirotek Septic Solutions

### Camano Island, Washington

- Owners:** Jen and Alan Chapin
- Years in business:** 14
- Employees:** 10
- Service area:** Camano Island and 70-mile radius
- Specialty:** Onsite system installation, pumping, repair, inspection
- Affiliations:** Washington Onsite Sewage Association
- Website:** [www.envirotekwa.com](http://www.envirotekwa.com)



Using a Kubota excavator, operator Kale Klitzke fills in around a new onsite system incorporating an OSCAR (Onsite Sand Coil Area Recharge) system from Lowridge Onsite Technologies and a NuWater aerobic treatment system from Enviro-Flo. Technician Diaz Griffin watches.

“I want to make sure the customers’ systems last as long as possible. The only way to do that is to use better products and better methods of putting things together.”

**Alan Chapin**

During his years in the business, Alan saw ways to improve on installation practices he had observed. He was determined to clean up construction scrap and carry it away instead of burying it the septic tank hole. He vowed to use the highest-quality components and take extra steps to ensure sound, leak-free systems.

“It’s wet here in the Northwest,” he says. “One thing we do is seal all penetrations, not only on the inside but also on the outside, so that water has no chance of ever infiltrating the system. That’s a big detail, because a lot of failures happen due to hydraulic overload. It’s not a lot of extra time, and it’s very little extra money to go that extra step. For me, \$3 of bentonite as opposed to just epoxy seems like good insurance.”

Install crews use clear polycarbonate sight tubes to test and fine-tune pressure distribution for new and existing systems. They install clean-outs at the lateral ends and use threaded fittings to fasten the tubes, which stand about 5 feet out of the ground. “Now when we run the pump we can clearly see where the liquid level is in all those sight tubes,” Alan says. “We place a little orange ball inside so we can see the water level from a distance, because that ball is floating.”

Quality practice also extends to the pumping side, and it starts when a customer calls the office. Jen says, “We tell them what we’re going to do verbally, and then they get a confirmation letter. We send out our qualified technicians with our high expectations, and we follow up afterward. It seems to work out well.”

Alan adds, “We don’t park in the driveway. We run extra hoses. We have two people on site so we can always protect the landscape. It’s not about getting in and out as quick as possible. We take a little more time and make sure the tank is clean when we leave.”

### THE RIGHT STUFF

The pursuit of excellence emphatically includes the selection of team members. “We have a long process to hire the right person,” Alan says. “We don’t hire just to fill a hole or a gap. Our core values are excellence, generosity and enthusiasm. People need to have those at a minimum to work here.”



Installer Kale Klitzke documents timer settings on an Aquaworx by Infiltrator control panel.

### AIMING HIGHER

Camano Island, about an hour north of Seattle in Puget Sound, is about 18 miles long and 3 miles across. It has about 15,000 full-time residents and up to 18,000 in summer; the population is growing quickly. The entire island is served by septic systems. Envirotek reaches out to a 70-mile radius from home base, covering Island, Snohomish and Skagit counties.

Jen spearheads the hiring process, which includes phone interview screening, a face-to-face interview with her, a group interview with the two owners and Mahoney, followed by a two-hour in-the-field interview to give the prospect a taste of life on the job.

“Yes, it’s a lot of work,” Jen says. “But we know it makes a difference to our customers and our employees. Often the first thing a new employee says is, ‘Wow, it’s different around here.’ It’s the high level of expectation for how we take care of the customer and the way we treat each other and hold each other accountable.”

Alan adds, “Our ratio of say-do is one-to-one; if we say it, we do it. That is standard operating procedure for everybody. If they say they’re going to do something, they make sure that it happens. Customers don’t get disappointed because they didn’t get what they were promised. Our employees are the reason we get so much repeat business.”

### DIVERSE PORTFOLIO

New and repeat business cuts across all sides of the operation. Diversification developed naturally. “I always think, how can I improve on what’s being done,” Alan says. “From installation and inspections, I thought, If a customer needs a tank pumped, who’s going to pump it? We used to refer a lot of work to pumpers. It took us awhile to add a pump truck because of the cost, but eventually it got to a point where we could add that service.”

## HUMBLE, HUNGRY, SMART

Alan and Jen Chapin of Envirotek Septic Solutions on Camano Island, Washington, hire people more for personal qualities than for experience and skills.

The attributes they look for boil down to three words: humble, hungry and smart, as prescribed by business consultant Patrick Lencioni. “You can always train for skills,” Alan says. “Hiring people with those attributes will ensure a better chance for success as a team.”

**Humble** is not about thinking less of oneself, Alan observes. “Having humility in a team context is more about thinking of others. It’s a mindset that if I’m going to do or say something, I want it to add value to my team and to my customer. It’s thinking about how to add value for someone else instead of thinking, ‘What’s in it for me?’”

**Hungry** means having a focus on finding a way. “We don’t complain,” Alan says. “We don’t act like victims. We’re going to find a way to make it happen with the resources and the people we have here. That may mean staying late and coming in early. It’s having a sense of excitement about the work we’re doing.”

**Smart** “doesn’t mean book smart,” Jen says. “It means can you work with other people? Do you know how to communicate with them? It’s knowing what to say and when to say it, knowing how people feel in a meeting or in a room.”

These attributes in all team members help Envirotek create an experience that customers appreciate and remember.

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