

Industry relationships can turn into true friendships

Time passed and I learned that helping people was like planting seeds.



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Dan Holohan

A long time ago, I was doing a hydronics seminar somewhere in Virginia, around D.C. A young guy came up to me during the first break and introduced himself as Dan Foley. So right off the bat, we had that Irish thing in common.

Dan was working for a contractor and he was clearly in love with hydronics, which is a bit unusual for an area where the first language spoken is generally Heat Pump. He bubbled over with enthusiasm, questions, thoughts and observations. I liked him right away. You'd like him, too.

We stayed in touch and the years rolled by. He got to a point where he realized that, yes, he was an entrepreneur and, yes, he really needed to be in the driver's seat, so he left his employer on good terms and opened Foley Mechanical, now of Lorton, Va.

Whenever my travels brought me near Dan, he'd call and ask if I had time to look at a few projects he was doing. He wasn't looking for my advice at this point; he just wanted to show me what Foley Mechanical could do. He had hired some of the sharpest people I have ever met in this business. They ate challenges for breakfast.

Over the years, Dan has taken me into homes that are major construction sites, places that have motor courts and granite doghouses that are the size of most garages, and homes that have underground entrances to Batcave-like spaces that could house Jay Leno's vehicle collection. I saw multiple boilers, piped and controlled in ways that made me drool, and lots of radiant and snow melt and indoor pools, and each of those projects kept the promises Foley had made to the crazy-rich owners.

So there was that, but Dan could also do the old stuff, which is unusual for a Southern man. The antique steam-heating systems of the District of Columbia and environs spoke to him and he spoke back in a language as old as this industry. He calmed and cajoled and quieted each one, and he kept his promises.

I smile when I remember the younger man who once asked me for advice on these old systems. Foley grew to be a man in full, and as good as it gets in this industry.

Forced-air farce

So about Erin and her husband, Drew. Erin is my daughter and next month she will own HeatingHelp.com because she is very wise in all things Internet. She is a woman in full. She and Drew bought a small house in Silver Spring, Md., a few years ago. It was a foreclosure and had appeared on one of those reality shows where they try to fix up a house so they can sell it. This one didn't work out so well. The former owner, a general contractor, went belly-up and bankrupt, and the house sat empty and on the market for several windy winters.

On his way out the door, the contractor removed much of the guts of the house and left the future owners, they being Erin and Drew, with a house that had not been properly loved, respected or winterized, and it gets very cold in Silver Spring.

Several surprises greeted the new owners when they turned on the water for the first time, and other surprises quickly followed. Erin and Drew sucked it up, knowing what they had gotten themselves into. I wondered about the furnace and the electric water heater and the questionable air-conditioning system and the miserable ductwork, so I called the best guy I knew because living in this house is my daughter, son-in-law and grandgirl.

Dan showed up with his guys and went over the whole place. I thanked him and he told me that he would treat them as if they were family. He meant it and I loved that. He and his guys did what they could with the budget the young couple had, which wasn't much. Dan laid out a plan — this first, then that, then perhaps this down the road. It was a good plan and they set it in motion.

But it gets very cold in Silver Spring, and The Lovely Marianne and I like to visit there.

So here's the thing about being a writer. I figure nothing truly bad can ever happen to me because even if it does, I can write about it and make money. We suffered through a few winter visits with that miserable furnace and obscene ductwork, and I became obsessed with this powder room the general contractor had cobbled onto the side of the little house. In January, you could hang a side of beef in there.

I wrote a magazine column about this frigid mess and expressed how much I hated poorly designed forced-air systems, and how America would be a better place if it had more hydronic heat. In the column ([“Reality Shows,” May 2014](#)), I mentioned that even the best contractor I knew couldn’t make this lousy system work. And if he couldn’t make it better, then no one could.

I sent the column in and got paid. Lots of readers wrote to say they agreed with me about hydronics and how many ill-conceived, forced-air systems simply can’t be fixed. So there.

Here’s the delicious thing that happened next: Foley calls Erin, whom he’s treating like a sister at this point, to say he’s stopping by with his guys to do their annual service. They show up. His guys head downstairs to tend to the pathetic furnace. Dan smacks the magazine with my column down onto Erin’s dining-room table and spikes it with a thick index finger. “Your father thinks I can’t make this place work? I’ll show him!”

It’s that Irish thing I mentioned earlier.

Planting seeds

When he was done, Dan’s guys had installed a new, properly sized air-conditioning system. They also ran a split system to the third-floor bedroom suite, which previously had a window shaker and a portable electric heater.

He installed a mod-con boiler, beautiful panel radiators and tough cast-iron baseboard. His guys probed into walls and snaked PEX like hydronic proctologists. Doing a retrofit in a relatively tiny, brick house that has stood since the 1930s is a lot tougher than piping a brand-new mansion.

Dan installed wireless, electronic TRVs on the panel radiators. These speak to Erin’s iPhone. He installed radiators where none had ever been. He brought in a big indirect heater for the domestic hot water so I could shower all day and never again mention in writing, or any other way, that Foley couldn’t do this.

And he did it all without me knowing about it.

“I will take care of them like they are family,” he had said, and he and Erin worked out an agreement. As I said, she’s real good at Internet stuff.

They worked together like family. I love that.

Now here’s the thing about life. We all have to make money. That’s a given. But we don’t have to make it every day. I learned this early on when The Lovely Marianne and I started our little company. We started with no money at all. We worked from home. Someone I had never met would call me, often on a Sunday evening. He would ask for advice on a problem job. I’d listen and help if I could, even though that person wasn’t paying me. I didn’t ask for money, and most of the time, there was no money to be had anyway. It was just a guy in a jam. And as time went by, he helped me as well.

I had to make money, but I didn’t have to make it every day. I got that.

Time passed and I learned that helping people was like planting seeds. Those seeds grew and I was rewarded with a career that has been rich with friends, lush with memories and profitable. I learned so much from these people, and I wrote about most of them, both the good stuff and the not-so-good stuff. They have always been there for me when I needed them. Always.

“I will take care of them like they are family,” said Dan Foley, who keeps promises made.

I think this man represents all that is good and smart and noble in this industry, and I am blessed to have him as my friend. He makes money, but he doesn’t have to make it every day, and he understands the sheer power of that truth in our industry. He is a man in full. He nailed my column to Erin’s dining-room table with his big index finger and said he’d show me how it’s done.

He sure did.

And now I can finally visit Erin’s powder room in January without having to worry about shrinkage.

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