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## Failure: Not An Option

➔ How KV Excavating Installs Quality Systems



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**CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED**



KV Excavating installation crew foreman Paul Savage operates one of the company's two Case backhoes.

# Failure: Not an Option

A Pennsylvania installer has used intelligent design and customer education to build a 25-year track record of reliable onsite systems

By Ted J. Rulseh

## KV Excavating, Aston, Pa.

**Owner:** Karen Vickers

**Years in business:** 25

**Employees:** 7

**Specialties:** Onsite system installation and wastewater maintenance

**Affiliations:** Pennsylvania Septage Management Association, National Federation of Independent Business, Delaware County Chamber of Commerce, Midlantic Business Alliance

**Web site:** [www.kvexcavating.com](http://www.kvexcavating.com)

**K**aren Vickers will state it without blinking an eye: She has never had to replace one of her onsite systems. Not one in 25 years. "Never, ever."

That's a bold statement for the owner of a company that now installs, on average, 60 to 80 systems a year – some 1,500 systems of many kinds since inception. But Karen, of KV Excavating in Aston, Pa., isn't afraid to look a customer in the eye and say it.

Karen attributes her company's track record to knowing her business, knowing local geography and soils, hiring and keeping the right people, educating her customers about the choices they face, and teaching care and maintenance to help ensure that all KV systems are properly maintained.

Every KV system comes with a one-year warranty. "If the owner allows me to maintain it so I can make sure they don't do things they're not supposed to do, I give

them an additional four-year, free warranty," says Karen.

This approach helps KV prosper while installing quality systems in an industry where price often rules. Karen finds that the price-only mind-

"Here in Southeastern Pennsylvania, you can never guarantee exactly what you are going to find when you walk on-site," says Karen. "You've got to have a good eye and a keen ear for what the customer tells

**"I'm basically the salesman. You have to like me before you like my company. I've been told I don't fit the stereotype for an excavator. I'm not a young woman. I have 14 grandchildren. I'm just a little girl with a passion for what I do. I love dealing with people."** -Karen Vickers

set disappears as she builds homeowners' trusts and educates them about the kind of system the property requires.

### Serving growth

KV Excavating operates in a 50-mile radius of Aston, about 20 miles south of Philadelphia. The area includes fast-growing Philadelphia suburbs. The terrain consists mostly of level land and gentle slopes, but the soils vary greatly.

you, and you've got to know the area. A given site can require anything from a conventional in-ground system to a drip irrigation system. It just varies that much." KV can install every type of system including spray irrigation, a technology most often found in the north central part of the state.

Karen feels the personal touch is key to KV's success, and it starts the very first time a customer calls. "Someone always answers the phone

in my company, from five-thirty in the morning to nine at night, seven days a week,” she says. “The customer makes that phone call and has an actual person to talk to. This is the first step in any service business relationship that you build.

“An answering machine means people get a call back when someone has time for them. With a real person, a customer has someone’s undivided attention. My assistant, Jeanette Vickers, is usually the first person a customer would talk to. Her knowledge and versatility in the company are amazing.”

### Lay of the land

The next step is a site visit. “I make an appointment, and it’s free,” says Karen. “I don’t charge to go out. I’m basically the salesman. You have to like me before you like my company. I’ve been told I don’t fit the stereotype for an excavator. I’m not a young woman. I have 14 grandchildren. I’m just a little girl with a passion for what I do. I love dealing with people.

“When you go on site, you have to promote yourself and make the customer comfortable that you know what you’re doing. Once you’ve done that, you can teach them the choices they need to make. I tell my cus-

tomers, ‘It’s your house, it’s your money, it’s your choice.’

“I walk the property with the homeowner and ask all the pertinent questions. I learned a long time ago that if you listen to clients, they will actually give you the answers you need. If you’re honest with them and you’re willing to look at things through their eyes, then you can get them to look at things through your eyes.”

As she walks the land with the owner, Karen points out what she observes. She asks point-blank where they would like the system to go and, if there is an existing system, where it’s located. She tells the customer about soil characteristics and isolation distances. Before she leaves, the customer understands why some areas of the property may be suitable and others not. She roughly maps out places where the system might go – an Area A that would be the least costly, an alternative Area B, maybe even an Area C if the property is large enough.

“By the time I leave the property, I can give them a very good, close-proximity, ballpark number of what they are going to spend from the time they start the project to the time its ends,” says Karen.

## Knowing the Territory

Intimate knowledge of the soils and terrain in Southeastern Pennsylvania gives KV Excavating a competitive advantage, from which homeowners often benefit.

“There are very few areas, if any, in this part of the state where I haven’t installed septics,” says company owner Karen Vickers. “When I go to look at a property, if I know the home’s surroundings, I have a general idea what kind of system will work.

She was once called in on a job where a previous contractor had told a homeowner the only option for the property was a small-flow treatment facility. With just a site visit, she realized she had installed the system next door and knew there was another option for the property. As it turned out, a conventional system was installed.

In another instance a different type of high-cost and high-maintenance system was proposed. “They called me from the settlement table and asked me to put a number, site unseen, on this job,” says Karen. “I hadn’t seen the property, and I told them I had to see the property before I could guarantee a cost – I had to do a site visit.

“When I walked on site, I saw that I had done the house next door. I knew there was a 95 percent possibility of getting a standard, in-ground system on that property. I told them I would be willing to go in there, at no cost to them, and take a look and see if my gut instinct was right. If I’m right, they save money. If I’m wrong, they have nothing to lose. Guess what kind of system I was able to get on that property? You got it, a conventional one.

“I tell customers that if there is a part of your property that will perc, KV will find it. We don’t take the easy route. We look for the best system at the least amount of cost for long-term longevity.”

### Out for bids

This preliminary estimate, of course, is not the figure KV lives with. “I tell the customer, ‘No one can walk on water or see through grass,’” says Karen. That simply means the final, hard estimate comes only after soil profile evaluations and perc tests are complete.

“Until I open the ground and see what’s there, I can only propose based on what I know about the surrounding area,” says Karen. “Once we open up a test pit, then we have a very good idea what’s below that grass.

“I’ve been very, very close on all my initial bidding, and that makes my customers very, very happy. In all the

years I’ve been doing this, I have never been off more than a couple hundred dollars on an initial estimate. My husband (Bob) asks me how do I do it, and I tell him it’s because I pray before I go on site.”

Once testing is complete, Karen develops a written proposal. She invites customers to send that proposal to other installation contractors if they wish. She doesn’t fear losing business to cut-price competitors. Even if under-bid, she will not change her quote. “When I come back with a proposal, the number on that proposal doesn’t change,” she says. “I don’t play games. If a customer later calls me and says, ‘I got a price that’s \$100 less, will you drop \$100?’ I say



Paul Savage receives concrete septic tanks at a job site. Unloading the tanks is Steve Koons of Miller Concrete, the tank supplier.



This KV installation for a single-family home is a gravity-flow system featuring three septic tanks in series.

no, because I go in there to do the job right.

"Sometimes it is a bottom-line thing – they need that extra \$100 or \$200 in their pocket, and I respect that. But I also respect the fact that if I taught them what they need to

### Into the ground

When the customer approves the proposal, KV's designer prepares the system plans. Karen reviews and approves each design. "I don't charge my clients for a conventional design," she says. "I have this theory that if the

**"I don't charge my clients for a conventional design. I have this theory that if a client assigns me to do the testing and pays me for the testing up front and pays me to install the system, my give-back to them is a design that I guarantee to be approved by the local authority." -Karen Vickers**

know, they're not going to get short-changed on the kind of installation they need. When I leave, it's very important to me that even if I never see them again, they have enough knowledge to make the appropriate choices."

Karen generally recommends that customers design systems for one more bedroom than the house plans indicate. That lets the system accommodate a future buyer with a larger family, and it gives the existing owner flexibility to enlarge the house without having to upgrade the septic. Karen also cautions owners to plan carefully and avoid violating alternate drainfield areas they might need in the future.

client assigns me to do the testing, pays me for the testing up front and pays me to install the system, my give-back to them is a design that I guarantee to be approved by the local authority."

System installation involves two crews. One crew installs the tanks and the absorption areas. The company uses two Case backhoes for excavating. The second crew performs the backfilling and final grading, using a Case dozer for rough grading, then deploying a skid-steer loader with a Case Preperator – a tool that picks up most rocks and roots, and prepares and aerates the soil before fertilizer, seed and straw are applied.

"I am fortunate because the gentleman who leads the final crew happens to be my husband, and he can do with dirt what other people do on a canvas," says Karen. "Bob also does the soil profile evaluations and makes sure all soils are appropriate for the system before the sewage enforcement officer comes in to inspect." Bob also prepares the perc test holes; then another KV team member actually runs the tests.

### Thinking long-term

KV's work doesn't end when the system is in the ground. Karen conducts a no-charge maintenance meeting in which she teaches the new owners how to care for the system. If the house is sold while the system is still under warranty, she will hold a mandatory maintenance meeting for the new owner, as a condition for keeping the warranty in force. Karen also conducts maintenance meetings on request for homeowners with systems installed by others.

In recent years, KV has added system maintenance. The company owns two brand-new Peterbilt trucks. One has a 3,600-gallon Progress aluminum vacuum tank set up by Vacuum Sales Inc.

"I decided to add my own trucks so that we know all our systems are being serviced properly," says Karen. The maintenance side of the business is growing rapidly.

Meanwhile, Karen keeps up to date on trends in treatment technology, regulations and standards by attending meetings of the Pennsylvania Association of Sewage Enforcement Officers (PASEO) and



This Peterbilt pumper serves the maintenance side of the business and features a 3,600-gallon aluminum tank from Progress Tank Sales.

staying active in the Pennsylvania Septage Management Association (PSMA).

It's all in the name of making sure that KV excavating keeps its promises of systems that won't have premature failure. Never, ever.

"Just like the Constitution of the United States guarantees us the right to pursue happiness but doesn't guar-

**"I decided to add my own trucks so that we know all our systems are being serviced properly," says Karen. The maintenance side of the business is growing rapidly. -Karen Vickers**

antee we'll find it, we guarantee to teach the homeowner how to prevent a failure, but can't guarantee they will listen and follow our directions," Karen says. Her 25 year history says they do. ■



KV's new Peterbilt dump truck, new trailer, and new Case backhoe.