



Sam Dowdy Sr. and S & D Plumbing: Bringing new life to the plumbing industry

How this Texas plumber is changing the perception of the plumbing industry — one student at a time.



In order to teach young people about careers in the plumbing industry, S & D Plumbing owner Sam Dowdy Sr. (right) started his Plumbing Pipeline Program.

Sam Dowdy Sr. has stewarded S & D Plumbing for 35 years, and he now oversees the second generation of his family to run the business: his sons, **Sam Jr.** and **Dan Dowdy**, whose initials gave the company its name. S & D Plumbing thrives on quality workmanship and excellent customer service, and its success hinges on its well-trained and dedicated employees who strive to exemplify professionalism from top to bottom.

Dowdy has made it his mission to find the next generation of technicians with his Plumbing Pipeline Program, which he offers as a template for others to follow in recruiting employees. It's all part of his quest to not only make his company better but to bring new blood into the industry that has done so much for him and his family.

His efforts to reach out to students, educators and parents to help solve the worker shortage and improve the image

Photo credit: Brent Humphreys Photography

of the trade helped his company remain successful. They also earned Dowdy and S & D Plumbing the title of Plumbing & Mechanical's 2016 Plumbing Contractor of the Year.

Headquartered in Taylor, Texas, S & D Plumbing has approximately 45 employees and covers the greater Austin area and most of central Texas.

"We're a family-owned business," Dowdy says. "My wife and I started it when we were young. We ended up with two sons and two daughters. Both of the boys ended up becoming master plumbers, and they ended up liking different aspects of the business. My younger son likes service and repair, and S & D Plumbing is a service and repair company. My older son, Sam Jr., talked his mom into setting up a commercial plumbing company, S & D Commercial Services."

No matter what type of job it is, attention to detail is paramount. It helps to think of the customer as part of the family. "As a professional, you're the one that's responsible for the plumbing system in a building or in a house," he says. "If I go to my aunt's house and I don't take care of my aunt properly, then I'm going to be in a lot of trouble. That's the principle that we use in our business."

Entering the trade

Dowdy recalled how a chance encounter led him into a career in plumbing. "It's a funny story," he says. "My mom and my brother were working as carpenters on a project in Galveston, Texas. The plumber was doing some work on the house, and he asked my mom if she knew of a young kid who wanted to go to work for him and earn some money. The next day she woke me up and said, 'Guess where you're going today.' So that's how I got into plumbing."

Dowdy began working for B & C Plumbing in Galveston at age 15, learning the trade from **Ugo Bianchi** and **Fred Cruz**. Dowdy was not very serious student, but he threw himself into his work.

"Something about plumbing connected all the dots together, and I really enjoyed every aspect of it," he says. "Mr. Bianchi and Mr. Cruz were great teachers. I already had the work ethic because of my family background, so working was not a hard thing for me, but learning the trade — they made it interesting and fun. They took the time to explain things to me and it really



Photo credit: S & D Plumbing

In this YouTube video, Sam Dowdy Sr. talks about his inspiration for the Plumbing Piping Program — and why it is critical for the plumbing industry.

made a connection. By the time I started high school, I knew exactly what I wanted to do."

He took high school classes in the mornings and worked for B & C in the afternoons and over the summers. He would always remember the innovative, hands-on teaching methods that made learning fun. "Later it made it really easy to connect with the kids in the Plumbing Pipeline Program," Dowdy says. "In fact, that's the model that we use — the exact same model these two plumbers used with me."

Recruiting the next generation

About three years ago, with his sons firmly in charge of the two companies, Dowdy decided to concentrate on bringing new blood into the industry. He saw other plumbing companies hiring employees away from each other to fill their needs, but the number of qualified workers was dwindling. Dowdy knew he had to somehow expand the pool of employees and bring in younger people to the trade.

He had already been working with Associated Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors of Texas for a number of years to help pass House Bill 5, which allowed technical and vocational training back into Texas high schools. The inspiration was in part based on a personal incident.

"When my oldest son was in high school, he had a teacher who asked the students what they were going to be, and Sam Jr. said he was going to be a plumber.

She literally laughed at him," Dowdy recalls. "My wife and I went up to the school and let them have it. We started comparing salaries. The superintendent said, 'Yeah, I know you're right, but there's nothing I can do about it.'"

Dowdy did something about it. He knocked on doors at the state capital to get House Bill 5 passed. Then three years ago he started meeting with local high school superintendents to see if he could find students who were willing to go to work with his company.

He summed up his pitch this way: "I can offer them a job and a great career, and what they can offer me is technology. They can teach our guys to use smartphones, iPads, and how to use social media to make our plumbing company more successful. Therefore, I need your kids as much as they need me. Our industry is dying unless we can get new, fresh blood into it."

His proposal was for students to take early classes and work for S & D in the afternoons and evenings, as well as over summer break. In return, after graduation, the students would be offered a full-time job and a \$25,000 scholarship to the four-year PHCC apprenticeship program. Dowdy made sure that everyone knew that school came first, including activities such as sports, but he insisted they treat the job with respect.

The first candidate who took the job three years ago is now working for the company full time. "He graduated in the fall of last year and has his first license,"

continued on page 32

Sam Dowdy Sr. and S & D Plumbing: Bringing new life to the plumbing industry

continued from page 29



Photo credit: S & D Plumbing

The Dowdy family (left to right): Liz Dowdy, Sam Jr.'s wife; Sam Dowdy Jr.; Rhonda Dowdy, Sam Sr.'s wife; Sam Dowdy Sr.; and Dan Dowdy.

Dowdy says. “He’s making a big impact and doing really well already. In fact, he even won an award from the local chamber of commerce for customer service.”

The Plumbing Pipeline Program

The next season a co-op consisting of five school districts approached Dowdy about expanding the work program. Dowdy knew the PHCC had the curriculum and that his industry partners would come in to help out by providing mentors, tools and equipment. He called PHCC Texas Executive Director **Nancy Jones** and said, “Nancy, we’re on to something here. This is fixing to go big time.”

Dowdy, Jones and representatives of Milwaukee Tool met with the five school superintendents and their staffs and outlined a program to teach the kids plumbing. It would eventually be christened the Plumbing Pipeline Program. “I thought back to my childhood with Mr. Bianchi and Mr. Cruz, and in my mind I thought, I’m going to build it just like they built it for me,” Dowdy says.

Eventually the school districts teamed up with the Texas State Technical College, which now offers high school students training in plumbing and other trades.

“This year we will have two kids graduate,” Dowdy notes. “Ideally we want to have four every year — two for each company. They get to work on the commercial side and the

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residential service side, and then we can let them choose which aspect of plumbing they’d like to get into.”

The biggest obstacle the program had to overcome was the poor image of the trade. When Dowdy first started working with school superintendents, they told him the parents would object to plumbing as a career for their kids. “So it was my job to change the perception of the plumbing industry,” he says. “It began with a lot with community involvement.”

Dowdy now participates in career days in schools ranging from high school to kindergarten to get the word out about the merits of plumbing as a profitable career. Last year, S & D also set up a field day to show students and educators their operation firsthand. Sponsors included Milwaukee Tool, Bobcat Equipment, Mercedes-Benz Vans, Dodge Trucks, Spartan Sewer Machines, Trammell Software and Ferguson Plumbing Supply, who all showed off their tools and services.

Students were divided up into teams, given an iPad and assignments at various stations, including computer 3-D estimating, prefab construction and inventory control. They learned to drive tractors and solder pipe.

A professional videographer recorded the event and Dowdy uses the video to spread the word about the program through social media. “The kids can show the video to their parents, and schools can use it as a reference point,” he says. “You can talk about it all day long, but when you see it in operation, then it’s a whole different ballgame.”

Dowdy makes it clear that the Plumbing Pipeline Program is still evolving, but it’s shown great promise. He made a presentation about the program at the PHCC national convention in October, and feedback has been phenomenal. “The Plumbing Pipeline Program is a concept,” he explains. “It’s not a perfect program. It’s an idea you can put to work in your area.”

Building relationships

The Plumbing Pipeline Program can be seen as the culmination of Dowdy’s lifetime in the trade. He worked his way through the union apprenticeship program, got his master’s license and started his own company when he was just 23. The economy on the Texas gulf coast was booming, but the boom didn’t last. “I made the typical mistakes that most uneducated business owners make in our industry,” Dowdy notes. “I didn’t prepare for the economy to turn quickly, and it did.”

He liquidated his assets in Galveston, moved to Austin to be near his wife’s family and started over again. “The economy was really bad in 1985 and it was really, really hard work,” he says. “I

dug in my heels, and we had a couple of really good breaks along the way.”

The first break was making connections with multiple insurance companies doing below-grade leak investigations; they remain valuable clients to this day. Another breakthrough came when he followed plumber **Paul Shelton**’s advice and joined the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors — National Association.

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“He made one comment that stuck with me forever,” Dowdy recalls. “He said he was never successful in the plumbing business until he joined PHCC. Paul actually reminded me of that a few years ago. I asked him to repeat that story to my son. He said, ‘You’re never going to be successful until you get involved and start sharing your values with other people, and start sharing your successes and failures with other people. That’s what a trade association will do for you.’ So I’ve always been involved with PHCC since he taught me those lessons, and now it’s reached the next generation with my sons.”

PHCC provides an apprenticeship program for S & D employees, as well as ongoing training and business coaching. Quality Service Contractors, an organization within PHCC, also helped him build his service business. But it’s the interaction with his peers and manufacturer partners that are the most rewarding for Dowdy.

“PHCC provides a social network of other plumbing companies that we’re friends with, and we share information,” he says. “We’re not trying to be competitive; we’re just trying to make each other better. When you make each other better, you make for a better industry, which makes for a better economy, which changes how people perceive you and, ultimately, the industry.”

Dowdy renewed his emphasis on building key relationships, and it paid off. “When I was young my mom and dad would preach to me and say, ‘A good name is better to be chosen than great

riches’ and ‘You’ve got to really work hard on relationships.’ I began to bring those principles into the business and I really worked hard on that,” he notes. “I figured, all right, if those principles are true, then if you worry about building relationships, then money will come. That’s how we started building our business again.”

Dowdy points to the bond his family shares with his employees as the backbone

of the company. “We really work hard on making a connection and building relationships with our employees to let them know we really do care about them,” he says. “We care about the work they do. We care about their families. We care about them as individuals. Those factors make us really strong as a company.”

The result is superior customer service. “I’ve found that if you have a good connection with your employees, your employees will reflect that to the customers in the field,” Dowdy says. “They are more concerned with how things look when they are finished, how things look when they are installed, and how they present themselves to the customers when they know the company is going to stand behind the work they do.”

The company keeps employees engaged by providing a challenging work atmosphere that rewards employees with bonuses and incentives. “We also keep up with the latest and greatest in equipment and technology,” Dowdy explains. “We have the latest vehicles and the employees keep them immaculately clean.”

New technology includes smartphones and tablets, which are used to communicate on the job and promote the company on social media. Technicians document their work with photos, and then ask customers to comment on their projects online. “Today, social media drives everything,” Dowdy says. “If we look on social media and see good reviews, we know we’re doing a good job. Our guys are really proud of those reviews.”

The company is always searching for ways to improve. “We don’t like to do

things the way every other plumbing company does it,” Dowdy notes. “We read Plumbing & Mechanical magazine and Reeves Journal. We educate ourselves by going to conventions and look for niches in the marketplace. This makes us just a little bit different than the average company. We try and stay ahead of the curve. That’s what fed into the development of the Plumbing Pipeline Program.”

Dowdy’s 35 years in the industry have brought him a lot of great memories. “The most rewarding thing in my career is watching my sons do what they want to do,” he says. “Both of them wanted to be in the plumbing business. They gave me the drive to keep going. To watch them be successful is pretty much the greatest joy in my entire life. It’s a lot of fun to see people succeed at what they want to do.”

It’s that sentiment that is at the heart of the Plumbing Pipeline Program, which allows him to connect to the members of another generation. “At the end of the day, it’s about relationships,” Dowdy concludes. “I would argue to anybody that if you are in business to strictly make money, then you miss out on things. You miss out on the joys of life. But if you’re in business to build relationships — it’s funny how it works — money comes.”

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For more on the Plumbing Pipeline Program, check out the videos online and in the digital edition of Plumbing & Mechanical.