

Corporate downsizing did not drain one Bucks County man of resolve.
Former manager finds new job a perfect fit

By Claire Furia Smith

FOR THE INQUIRER

Fritz Carr will never forget his dreaded "last meal."

That's what he calls the breakfast meeting in January 1996 when he learned his senior level position with Roto-Rooter Inc. would "no longer be available" to him because of a corporate reorganization.

"I cannot describe the pain I went through," Carr said. "Work was my life. I was devastated."

Carr, whose full name is Frederick J. Carr, said he had spent 25 years with the company, working his way up from drain cleaner to regional manager overseeing most of the company's East Coast operations. He had even received a plaque for helping Roto-Rooter expand from drain-cleaning to plumbing services, a move that greatly boosted Roto-Rooter's sales.

Corporate downsizing might have ended his Roto-Rooter career, but Carr, 50, is not letting it stop him. He is working his way up from the bottom all over again.

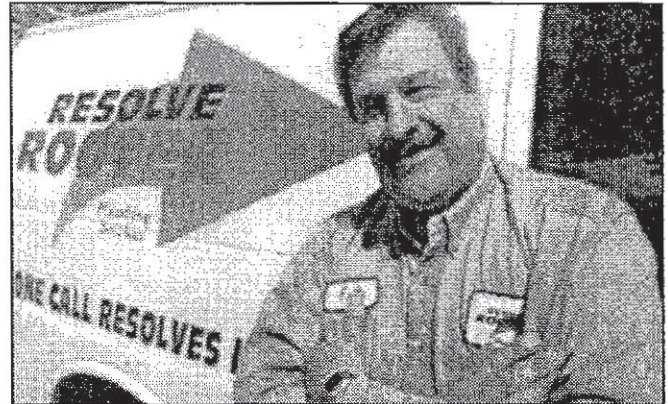
The Solebury Township resident launched his own emergency plumbing and drain-cleaning service from his home, in competition with his former employer in the Philadelphia region.

Called Resolve Rooter Inc., the company started 18 months ago as a one-man operation, with Carr's wife, Denise Carr, working the phones, and his 18-year-old son, Fritz Carr Jr., accompanying him on some emergency calls. For the first time in 20 years, Fritz Carr had to go out on jobs himself, often in the middle of the night.

Today, Carr has eight trucks and eight plumbers working for him. Resolve Rooter has gone from tackling one job a day to almost 30. By the end of the year, Carr expects the business to take in about \$120,000 a month in revenues, up from \$3,000 a month a year ago.

"Fritz knows the path to growth from prior experience," said John Winther, a Roto-Rooter area manager based in Cincinnati who worked with Carr in the 1980s. "He will probably be a competitor for Roto-Rooter to contend with in the near future."

But Carr admitted that he had a long way to go, and said his early success has not come easily.



Resolve Rooter Inc.'s owner, Fritz Carr, standing before one of his eight new vans, now competes with his former employer, Roto-Rooter Inc.

Because Carr's practical experience was in drain cleaning and not in plumbing, he had to hire a plumber to train him in his Bucks County home, and he had to enroll in plumbing school and acquire plumbing licenses.

He also attended business seminars, hired an advertising agent, and even flew to California to research an entrepreneur who was running a lucrative plumbing business there. After that, he bought his first cargo van, and placed an advertisement in the Bell Atlantic Yellow Pages that covered Lower Bucks County.

Since then, Carr has placed new Resolve Rooter ads featuring former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Bill Bergey in directories for Upper Bucks County, Montgomery County and Philadelphia. He plans to extend his reach into Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton and Delaware County this year, Carr said.

Still Carr is not taking a salary, preferring to plow any profits back into the business.

Carr said he pays more than \$11,000 a month just for ads in phone books, and will start paying \$20,000 a month once he expands into a few more directories. And that doesn't include the \$75,000 in cash he's paid for equipment and tools, he said. Vans are an additional \$25,000 each, said Carr, who leases the vehicles

Solebury resident is competing with former employer

to his employees.

"When I went to buy my third truck, [the financing company] told me I was already past my limit, even though I hadn't missed any payments," Carr said. "When you start a business, you have no credibility."

Carr had similar experiences when he tried to make other purchases. Neither Home Depot nor local plumbing suppliers would give him an account at first.

"I couldn't get supplies," Carr said. "Nobody would give me credit because I wasn't in business long enough. These were people who knew me on a first-name basis from when I made purchases for Roto-Rooter."

When he was a regional manager at Roto-Rooter, Carr handled nine Roto-Rooter branches from New Brunswick, NJ, to Miami, accounting for about \$25 million in gross sales.

Carr said his efforts in the early 1980s to add plumbing services to a company that was only offering drain-cleaning services increased Roto-Rooter's sales and earned him recognition within the company.

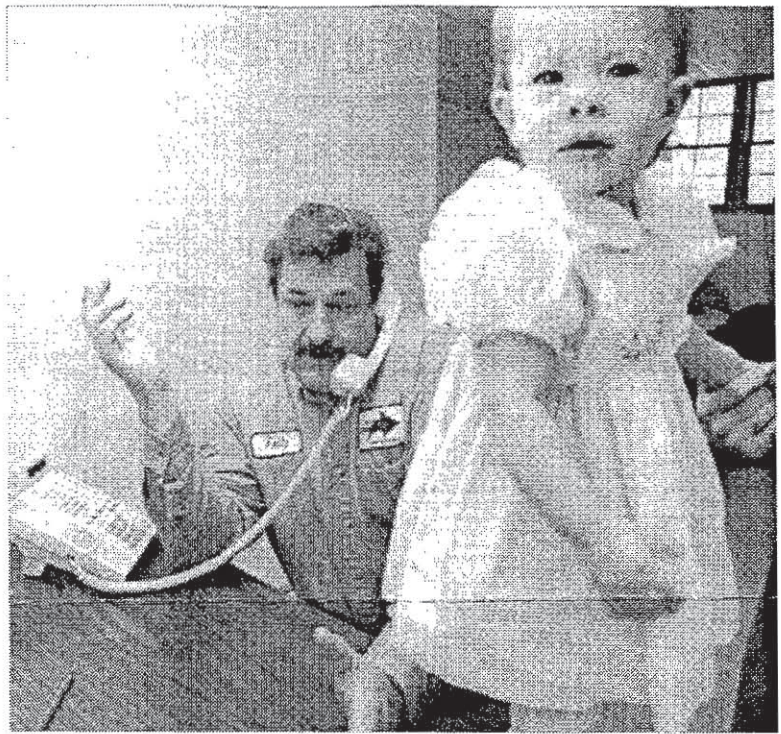
"A lot of plumbers were starting to advertise drain-cleaning, and were taking Roto-Rooter's market share," said Winther, who manages many Roto-Rooter operations across the country. "So what Fritz wanted to do was get Roto-Rooter into plumbing. He became known as the champion of the testing of waters of the plumbing market."

Carr said he started hiring licensed plumbers and enrolling his existing employees in plumbing courses. He also commissioned an outside plumbing inspector to write a six-month training course that became the standard for teaching plumbing skills to drain cleaners at Roto-Rooter.

"At first, I did it without the company's OK," said Carr. "When they found out, they were real upset, but after they saw what was happening, they said: 'Wow.'"

Carr said company officials even tapped him to help train branch managers in other parts of the country. In the mid-1980s, Carr was asked to give a presentation in Atlanta to about 200 Roto-Rooter franchise operators on how to expand into the plumbing business.

"Our business skyrocketed," Carr said. "All branches grew, and the company began to buy up more franchises. You could buy a drain business, and roll it into a plumbing and drain business in about six months."



Fritz Carr conducts business from an office in his Solebury Township home as his 13-month-old daughter, Sydney, walks on the desk.

Roto-Rooter, which was founded in 1935, now offers plumbing and drain-cleaning services in most of the United States and about half of Canada. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of the publicly traded Chemed Corp. in Cincinnati.

Through its Roto-Rooter subsidiary, Chemed reported bringing in \$102 million in plumbing revenues, and about \$97 million in drain-cleaning revenues for 1999. The figures do not include business from Roto-Rooter's more than 500 independent franchise locations.

"Fritz comes up with a lot of the craziest ideas," Winther said. "A lot of his craziest ideas have worked and are still working" at Roto-Rooter.

Today, Carr's job is much different. On a recent afternoon at his home, Carr was collecting invoices and other paperwork from his workers -- mostly former Roto-Rooter employees -- who were coming in and out of his kitchen. His wife and mother-in-law, Marlene Ordorff, were taking business calls, doing payroll, and minding the Carrs' 13-month-old daughter, Sydney.

Carr's father-in-law, Roger Ordorff, was downstairs painting the basement, which had recently been transformed into the Resolve Rooter office.

"I believe in my heart I helped Roto-Rooter grow," Carr said as he looked at the activity going on around him. "Now I'm going to compete with them."