

# RAISING THE BAR FROM DOWN BELOW

## Innovation Runs Deep at Insight LLC

by Allyson Markey



Insight LLC has one of the largest fleets of utility locating, vacuum excavation and video pipe inspection equipment on the east coast.

**D**o you ever consider what is under your feet? Look down—what are you standing on? Grass, carpet, concrete? If you're like me, you don't spend 2.2 seconds considering the subsurface. We expect our toilets to flush, our water to run, our lights to turn on, our cable to work, and our burners to light so we can make our family dinner.

But, oftentimes, what is below the ground is more interesting than what is above it. And the companies that ensure that our pipelines, ovens, showers, TVs, and internet are up and running are those we should be thanking. People like the men and women of Insight LLC (trademarked insight™)—a 75-person-strong, Fairfax County-based utility service company that utilizes state-of-the-art techniques and equipment to perform day-to-day work.

Operating out of Chantilly, Va., the Insight team brings together decades of utility experience and a vast wealth of knowledge to provide utility locating and designating services, vacuum excavation and surveying to

federal, state and local governmental agencies and to private sector clients in the Washington, D.C. area.

The company is owned and led by Susan Arnold and her husband, Dennis “Denny” Showalter. After spending nearly 15 years in the utility locating industry, they decided to launch their own business in 2004. “Not only are we passionate about underground construction and utility servicing, but we want to be a disruptive force in the industry to make it—and ourselves—better,” says Susan. “So we decided to put our blood, sweat and tears into starting Insight.”

But starting an industry-changing business isn’t easy. Early on, the couple realized that exceptional teamwork—especially between them—was how their company would make its mark as an industry leader.

“We started out in an office in our basement, with one vacuum excavation truck we had purchased,” says Susan. “We both set up the company, as a team, and instill our ideas of teamwork into everything that we do.”

But it wasn’t only great teamwork that got the business off the ground—it was also Denny’s technical background. He is a leading expert in



Pictured here is Dennis “Denny” Showalter, who founded Insight LLC with his wife, Susan Arnold.

the industry, with over 28 years of professional experience in the field of utility locating. His notable achievements include serving as the current President of the local National Utility Contractors Association, as a former board member for the National Utility Locating Contractors Association, and as an industry representative for many committees and organizations, including the Best Practices Committee of the Common Ground Alliance, the Damage Prevention Advisory Committee of the Virginia State Corporation Commission, and the Virginia Task Force 2000, which reviewed and recommended changes to the state’s damage prevention legislation.

“Denny has such a great reputation in the industry and his breadth of knowledge is second-to-none,” Susan says, “but then again, I am biased!”

## UTILITY CONTRACTOR STEPS UP WITH AN INVENTIVE SOLUTION

Unfortunately, even legislation can’t prevent problems from happening. And in the world of underground contracting, problems can lead to some seriously (and literally) sticky situations. Take, for example, a pipe break underneath the historic Exorcist Steps.

For those who are not fans of the 1973 horror film *The Exorcist*, the infamously nicknamed stone staircase is featured during one of the movie’s major turning points. In reality, the now 122-year-old stairs are located in Georgetown, a historic neighborhood and commercial/entertainment district located in northwest Washington, D.C.

While meeting with a client, Denny discovered the need for repairs at

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**Dangerous confined space entries are made safe with the right personal protective equipment and safety measures.**

the base of the Exorcist Steps, where an old clay pipe had collapsed under the stairs. For three years, DC Water had been working to find a solution, and other consultants had been hired to remedy the situation, but none was able to make the final fix.

Why weren't they able to make the fix? Because due to the historic nature of the site, they were unable to do any excavation work.

"I wish I could say that the historic nature of the site was the only problem," adds Susan, "but it wasn't. We realized that there was a manhole at the top of the steps, which is

in over 30 feet of fill. Oh, and the manhole is located next to several new multimillion-dollar condos. Needless to say, excavation was not going to happen."

After speaking with the client, the Insight team determined they would have to fix the pipe from the inside out, using a bladder system. Typically, a bladder is pulled from one access point to another while it repairs the pipe. But with only one access point (the manhole) and no means to create another one, they needed to devise a new, innovative solution—one that was not on the market.

So they did.

"We realized that instead of pulling the bladder across, we would have to push it. So one of our great team members engineered a method that uses a camera to push the system through the pipe," says Susan. "We didn't know if it would actually work. No one did."

Being an industry expert comes with its perks. Namely, great relationships within the industry. The company contacted the bladder manufacturer and worked with international engineering consultants to see if the device would work. They also reached out to peers for additional insight and opinions.

"There were extensive tests. We set up demonstrations of our system with the client, bladder manufacturer and regulators," says Susan. "And you know what—it worked."

Next came the moment of truth. With bated breath, the crew lowered their device into the real pipe. A team member entered the pipe, using a laser attached to the camera to watch the installation. And while working slowly through the night in the dark underground, by morning, the pipe was fixed.

"It was a spectacular moment," recalls Susan. "We were so proud of the project and our team. It was wonderful."

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Susan Arnold

## INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

Since then, the company has worked on some of the biggest projects in the region, including the Owings Mills Town Center in Owings Mills, Md., DC Water's Clean Waters Project, and the U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters in D.C.

But perhaps it's what the company is accomplishing in the industry that is most important. The team has worked tirelessly to ensure that safety remains a top priority, including shaping utility damage prevention legislation that ensures that utilities are safely located and excavated. They have also participated in the creation of industry safety standards, specifically serving on the committee tasked with rewriting the District of Columbia's "One-Call Law."

The business is also active in multiple industry organizations, including the National Utility Contractors Association, Associated Builders and Contractors (Virginia and Metro Washington chapters), Washington Building Congress, Heavy Construction Contractors Association, the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association, and the American Society of Highway Engineers.

"We love this industry, truly," says Susan. "And we haven't met a professional—client or competitor—that we don't like. We believe that being a part of the community means supporting and building not only our business, but the industry as a whole. That's why our partnerships with other organizations are so important."

So the next time you observe the ground beneath your feet, take a moment to appreciate that there are great companies like Insight that are making sure the underground is as safe as the ground above. 🐶

*Author Bio: Allyson Markey is a contributing author located in San Diego, Calif.*



Insight LLC has extremely stringent safety standards, and works tirelessly to ensure that safety is a top priority on every project.



The company's trucks, crews and innovative techniques are available 24/7.