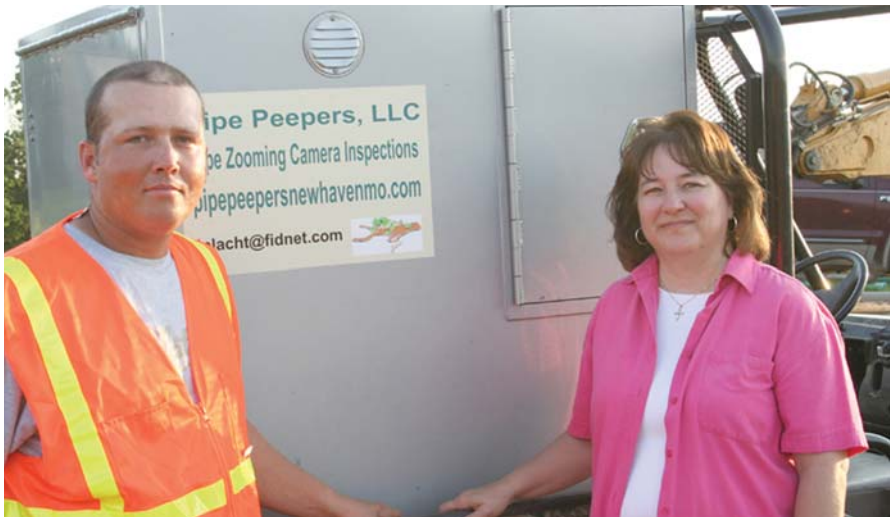
Woman Uses Crawler Inspection Technolgy To Launch 2nd Career In Rehabilitation

When a friend told Laura Placht that she'd be perfect for sanitary and storm inspection, it was beyond anything the former church secretary ever imagined as a second career. But a new ordinance in some Missouri cities had dictated that all lines in any new development be inspected by the developer before the city takes them over. This created a business opportunity that Laura began researching immediately – on the internet, in trade journals and by talking to other professionals in the industry.

In October 2007, she started Pipe Peepers LLC, based in New Haven, MO, specializing in sanitary and storm inspection. With her business plan established, she obtained Woman-Owned Business Enterprise Status in the state of Missouri. She immediately started meeting with the city officials and developers, setting up accounts payable and receivable, and seeking advice on equipment. With one camera operator, Roy Hardester, who has 12 years of construction experience, she now operates one of the few woman-owned pipeline inspection companies in the country.

"I actually get excited to be able to look at the video and identify sags and cracks in pipes," she said. She continues to develop her eagle eye. In preparation for her first big job, Placht knew that a versatile inspection system would be central to her business. She wanted a local contact in case repairs were needed and located distributor Steve Hyink of Key Equipment & Supply. He took Placht and a team of construction consultants she was acquainted with through the criteria for selecting video inspection equipment, including the benefits of a steerable, compact crawler with intuitive software. She realized that with the right system, she could work out of her home with little overhead. And, if manageable enough, the equipment could do the job with one operator.



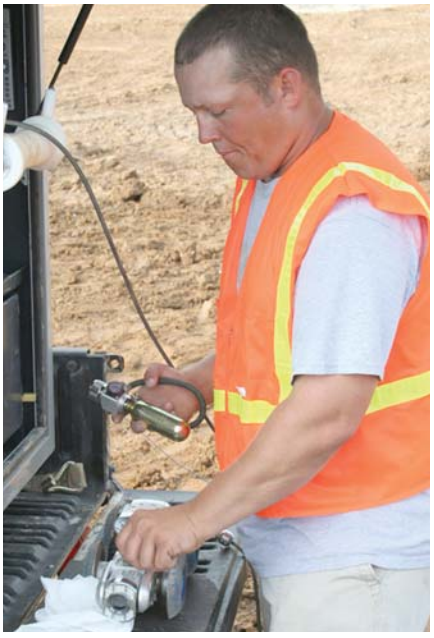
Equipment, software selection

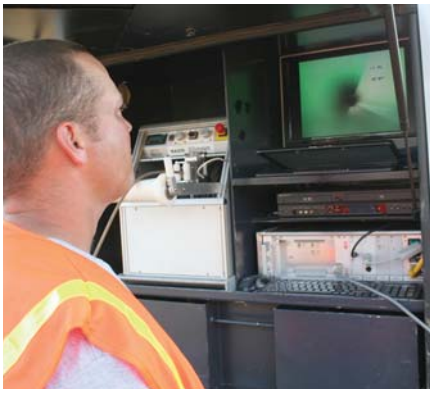
After viewing side-by-side performance demos, Placht selected the Envirosight ROVVER 125, a compact crawler, and WinCan V8 as her primary inspection documentation software. The 12-inch long crawler was well suited to the typical 8 to 48 inch concrete and PVC pipe that Pipe Peepers would encounter. Well armed with the new system, she and her operator took on a job for the Foresight Development Group of St. Charles in the nearby city of St. Peters. Placht found the easy-to-navigate WinCan software easily synced up with the city's GIS system and she was impressed with the crawler's versatility. The powerful illumination, lightweight design and ability to traverse debris and pipe taps were important to meeting the city's expectations. A top consideration, due to occasional slippery pipe surfaces, was the crawler's steerable six-wheel drive, which can quickly be configured with various wheels (including abrasive ones) for any combination of pipe size, material and condition. Because it maintains an aggressive grip, she found the crawler works very well in steep pipelines and in high water flows.

Placht and her team noted the way that the ROVVER's lower center of gravity prevented it from flipping over. "We saw that the short, steerable wheelbase would provide maneuverability through the tight bend of a curved invert without flipping or wedging," she said.

"The compact crawler truly represents the latest technology," she added. "We also needed a crawler that's waterproof and submersible in high water flows. And, my operator can use the handheld pendant for convenient control of lighting, focus, speed, zoom and steering at the manhole."

According to Placht, weather conditions in Missouri dictate the need for a mobile system. "We need to get to manholes in muddy and snowy situations," she said. "If you were in a van, you would be sitting at home – but we can outfit a Kawasaki mule and get into tight spaces." She quickly learned WinCan V8 software and the ability of WinCan personnel to commandeer the software remotely to be extremely helpful. "The pictures are so clear. It's amazing to think how deep in the ground you are and how plainly you can see a spider crawling or a pencil lying on the side of the manhole – the clarity is unbelievable."





Top: *Roy Hardester and Laura Placht*
Middle: *One robotic crawler and a dream.*
Bottom: *Checking for crags and sags.*

Striving to be the best

As a woman-owned business and a newcomer in a predominantly male industry, Pipe Peepers had to do everything better. "We had to produce superb results and reporting, and deliver high levels of communication – always checking in to make sure the data is exactly what the client wants," she said. "Just because you can operate at 50 feet per minute, it doesn't mean you have to, especially at the cost of accuracy." She looks over footage, prints the reports, copies the DVDs, presenting it all to the client in a binder.

Pipe Peepers' main focus so far has been new construction. Most of the problems they identify are debris, cracks, limbs and leaves. "As a new business owner, it is exciting to know that what other companies are paying three people to do, I can do even more efficiently with one person," she said.

For the cities of St. Charles and St. Peters, Pipe Peepers inspected 16,000 feet of pipeline in a new subdivision, mostly 8 to 48-inch concrete and PVC. The city was impressed with Pipe Peepers professionalism. The rave reviews of the first job led to two new ones. "We identified some severe cracks in the new pipe, nipping a future problem in the bud, as well as rocks in boots from shoving the pipe together, breaks in joints, offset joints, a lot of debris and sags. It helped the town save time, money and future headaches, because what the developer fixes now saves the city expense after they take over.

"By making the developer responsible for the infrastructure and paying for the inspection, the city saves – big time," says Placht.

She explained the chronology: the developer turns in the report to the city, then the city sends the developer a punch list of things that need to be repaired. Pipe Peepers inspects those repairs and one year after that, it gets televised again before the city takes over the subdivision. This way, when the city takes over, they aren't immediately dealing with sewer back-ups or other problems that could have been avoided. It makes life easier for both sides. Brad Kazmaier, president of Foresight Development Group, an area subdivision developer, recently told Placht that "I actually like the ordinance because it proves that we did the job right and we can't be held responsible later down the road should something go wrong."

Technology asset

Placht credits much of Pipe Peepers competitiveness with the technology. After less than a year, she is comfortable handling bids, sharing DVD results with the town engineers and printing reports. There's a bit of ebb and flow with the town's needs and so far, nothing she cannot handle. In her diligence, Placht gives the city a checklist to make sure they've gotten everything on behalf of the developer.

Meanwhile, Placht continues to make herself at home in the world of storm and sewer pipes. Placht thinks a conscientious woman's perspective actually makes Pipe Peepers stand out. She enjoys talking to the cities, developers, salespeople, even to the banks and insurance companies explaining what she does. "I wanted to own my own business and felt a personal calling to take on the challenge," she says, "I have been blessed with everything working out the way it has."

From obtaining her minority business status to having a great video inspection system, Placht is ready for her next inspection jobs. Her next purchase is a push camera for laterals as she takes Pipe Peepers to new levels.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- *Pipe Peepers, (573) 237-2598, pipepeepersnewhavenmo.com*
- *WinCan, (505) 341-0109, wincanamerica.com*
- *Envirosight, (866) 936-8476, envirosight.com*