

Putting in the work

Aqua Doc takes care of lakes and ponds by taking care of its customers

BY RACHEL ABBEY MCCAFFERTY

John M. Wilson Jr. grew up seeing his father work as a doctor, helping people get and stay well. His life's work has been focused on helping ponds and lakes do the same. That's why he calls his company Aqua Doc.

Wilson first got started in the pond and lake management business back in 1983, working for a neighbor who dug lakes and ponds. He often heard customers asking about how to care for those water features: what to do about algae or weeds, how to care for fish or make it safe for swimming. So, the company added that kind of customer service to its offerings.

By 1989, Wilson had bought the company from his neighbor and paid for it in full. At the time, it was "one man, one truck," he says, but he knew he wanted to grow the business.

"I didn't know how big it was going to get, how large it could go," he says.

Today, Chardon-based Aqua Doc employs about 200 people who work in 10 offices serving 13 states. The company serves approximately 12,000 customers ranging from individuals to big



Heath Spence and Carter Bailey treat one of the large lakes Aqua Doc serves.

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corporations, golf courses and marinas in the Great Lakes. And its products and services have expanded in that time, too. Aqua Doc offers everything from fish stocking to stormwater management, in addition to providing products like docks, fountain systems and lighting.

"It's been a lot of hard work," Wilson says.

Wilson, who serves as the company's president, owns the business with his

wife, Jeanine Wilson. She works as Aqua Doc's executive vice president, overseeing sales, marketing and IT.

Being family-owned — and supporting the communities in which it works — is important to Aqua Doc, says Jeanine Wilson. She says the company sponsors a lot of events — like the annual rubber duck race on the Chagrin River — and parades, in addition to supporting nonprofits focused on helping those facing homelessness and caring for local parks. The goal is to help the community and the people who live in it.

"When you have it and you can give it back, it's always a good feeling," John M. Wilson Jr. says.

Giving back seems to be a common theme for Aqua Doc. Wilson says customer service — and going above and beyond to meet customer needs — has always been core to the company's



Aqua Doc employs about 200 people across multiple states.

approach. At first, the business was about immediately responding to customer calls. But that strategy has evolved over time to include the creation of ongoing service plans, as the company became far more “proactive than reactive,” Wilson says.

“It’s funny. Everyone goes, ‘We’re in the lake and pond business.’ But no. We’re in the customer service business,” Wilson says. “And if we can take care of the customer, the customer’s going to take care of us.”

It seems like that strategy has paid off over the years: annual customer retention is more than 90 percent, Wilson says.

But the business is about more than just responding to customer needs. Each lake or pond is unique. There’s a lot of science behind what Aqua Doc does, Wilson says, and it changes a lot more frequently than seemingly related landscaping work.

The water in a pond or lake one day won’t be the same water that’s there a few weeks later, due to factors like rain and evaporation. The size of the pond or lake matters. And Aqua Doc isn’t just caring for the water itself; it’s caring for the entire “ecosystem” of the pond or lake: the plants, the fish, the frogs. The products Aqua Doc uses matters, and so does the education of its employees.

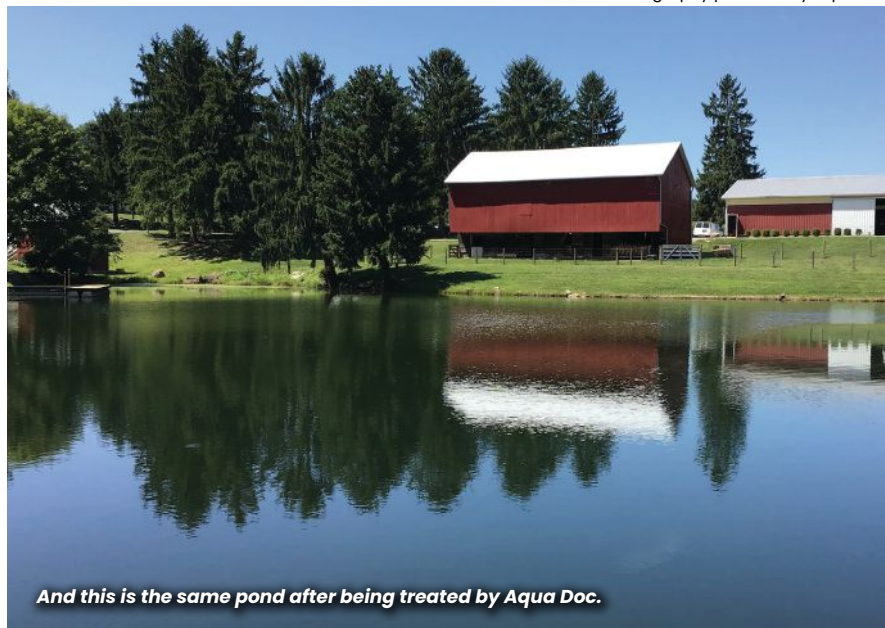
Finding solid employees who want to work hard isn’t a challenge, Wilson says. But finding people who already know what Aqua Doc does and exactly how they do it, is. It’s not an industry that people can learn at just any higher education institution. It’s a niche business that requires specialized training.

Enter Aqua Doc U. The classes feature lessons and presentations from industry leaders and vendors. Employees have access to the program and, over time, some have moved to the other side of the classroom, taking on teaching



This is a pond prior to being treated by Aqua Doc.

Photography provided by Aqua Doc



And this is the same pond after being treated by Aqua Doc.

roles. Currently, he says, about 40 to 50 employees are participating in Aqua Doc U.

Wilson says he didn’t delegate a lot early on in the business, but Aqua Doc U gives him even more confidence in his

team. He knows they’ve all had enough training to diagnose issues on site and communicate clearly with customers.

“And I’ve always told everyone here: the more you learn, the more you’re going to earn,” he says. ●