

Automotive shop thrives with multi-faceted approach

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BETHALTO - Helmkamp Auto Service Inc. has been awarded the River Bend Growth Association Business of the Month for July.

"The (RBGA) is a great resource for small businesses," co-owner Janet Helmkamp said. "They promote us and support us. They are a big help to area businesses. This award was a nice surprise."

On April 1, the shop celebrated its 43-year anniversary. Janet and her husband, Gene, opened the first location in 1967 on Kansas Street in Bethalto.

"It was April Fool's Day," she said, laughing. "We did not think about it at the time, but what a day to pick."

Over the years, the family established a reputation for its friendly demeanor and high-quality service, building and growing just as it watched Bethalto do the same.

"When I started there were not any buildings around here to move into," Gene Helmkamp said. "I had always wanted to own my own shop. There was only one other shop in Bethalto, and they were not equipped to work on trucks."

In 1976, Helmkamp Auto expanded to its second location, the current home of McKay Auto Parts. A growing business necessitated a move again in 1987 to its current location at 405 W. Bethalto Drive on Illinois Route 140.

Janet said great customers are the reason for their success.

"We have one of the best customer bases a company could have," she said. "We have customers we have had since the beginning, and I truly mean that. We have their children and other family members coming to us now. We also have received a lot of new customers thanks to ConocoPhillips. That has been a great thing for the area and has been a big boost to our business."

"We support Bethalto, not only through taxes but through volunteering and donations to community organizations. We are proud of our community and what it offers our residents."

From the beginning, Gene decided he was going to provide a full-service automotive center, working on everything from small cars to light- and medium-duty trucks to the big recreational vehicles and service trucks.

"We are unique in that we do not specialize," Janet said. "Our ability to diagnose and repair the most common problems as well as the most high-tech attests to our unique 'piece of the pie' in our industry.

"A dealer is limited to handling what their dealership sells. A shop like ours must be able to work on everything and be multi-faceted."

Along with versatility comes "plain ol' good work." All shop technicians are experienced and ASE-certified in multiple categories of service and repair. To this day, Gene still oversees the shop and ensures a high standard of performance.

"He doesn't like to let a single vehicle leave here without driving it first," she said. "Keeping up with the (latest) technology has also been important to our business."

The couple's sons, Todd and Mike, are vice presidents in the company. Todd, who has worked for AC Delco and GM, returned to the family business and now works for the company full time. Mike was raised in the shop and helps run the family business.

Other technicians include Eric Bailey, Rick Philips, Ken Treadway, Jarrod Frazier and Jake Koeneman. Glenda Emmons works as company bookkeeper, and Jeneane DeSherlia provides customer service and marketing.

Helmkamp Auto follows up with every customer through phone calls and thank-you letters as well as a monthly newsletter filled with the latest Helmkamp happenings, industry news and recipes.

As always, the shop mascots are on hand to provide a friendly greeting for guests. Yorkshire terriers PJ, KC, Holly and Micky and Tux the sheltie come to work with the Helmkamps each day and often gain more attention from guests than their human counterparts.

The customer service area is overflowing with antique novelties, including a large cabinet filled with utensils, oil cans, miniature John Deere tractors, mementos from restaurants long since closed, and even a beer bottle from the Bluff City Brewery.

"I am a memorabilia person," she said. "I love history. This just came about from visiting auctions around town and things like that.

"It is part of the history of our area. It is amazing how many people will just stop and look at it."

Helmkamp Auto Service is open 7:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The shop also offers the Customer First Care extensive annual service plan, providing more than \$700 in repair costs for \$250, including oil changes, safety inspections, tire repairs, seasonal checks and discounts on alignment, transmission and brake work.

For more information call (618) 377-6821 or visit the Web site at www.helmkampauto.com.

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