

https://www.messenger-inquirer.com/mclean_county/livermore-fabricating-company-celebrates-53-years-in-business/article_503d89fb-df89-567f-9140-4e66a4f3ec00.html

Livermore fabricating company celebrates 53 years in business

By Freddie Bourne McLean County News
Sep 15, 2022



Karen Whitaker, left, Sabrina Sonner, center, and Venea Hounton, right, owners of A&S Fabricating Company in Livermore, stand in front of a conveyer project on Monday, Sept. 12, inside the facility's north annex.

Photos by Freddie Bourne | McLean County News

In 1968, Island native Henry Sonner decided to move back to Kentucky after working at steel mills and aluminum plants in Indiana and formed his own company with friend Ronnie Ashby one year later.

Now, the entity known as A&S Fabricating Company, is celebrating its 53rd year in business under the reigns of Henry Sonner's daughters: Karen Whitaker, current president; Sabrina Sonner, secretary, treasurer and steel buyer; and Venea Hounton, vice president, bookkeeper and human resources.

"We've been very blessed," Whitaker, 56, said. "I feel like one thing we're blessed (about) is Dad had the ambition years ago to quit a job, a secure job, with three little girls at home to strike out on his own. We're thankful and very blessed that he did that"

Originally starting out in a one-room block building on Lawrence Street, the business eventually settled at its current 110,000 sq. ft. facility at Kentucky Highway 431 in Livermore in 1972.

The job shop specializes in large, heavy custom steel fabrications, custom machining of large and small parts, contract industrial repairs, sandblasting and painting, and assembly and equipment building, while working with a number of industries from construction, dredging, excavating, plastics, water treatment facilities and more.

"We basically take a customer's blueprints ... and do it all under one roof," Whitaker said.

“Most of everything is bid,” Sabrina Sonner, 60, said. “We have a few contracts, but mostly we have to bid every time to win the job.”

On average, the shop works on 20 to 25 projects per day with their staff of about 28 employees, led by general manager Brad Williams.

The business requires machinists who have knowledge of equipment dating back to when the business began, which can sometimes be a hindrance when looking for the right fit.

“We have a lot of manual machines — not the (computer numerical control) where you push the button,” Whitaker said. “Trying to maintain a talented, experienced workforce is always a challenge.”

“It has to be well orchestrated,” Sabrina Sonner said. “ ... They’re very skilled at what they do.”

The early years saw quick changes in leadership when Ashby eventually left the business in 1972 to focus on farming and sold his portion of the entity to Henry Sonner.

Hounton, 62, first came on board full-time after graduating from McLean County High School in 1978, followed by Whitaker in 1984.

Sabrina Sonner went off to Western Kentucky University to study accounting and finance before getting recruited by her father to come back home and work at the shop in 1987. She already had a full-time job working at Fruit of the Loom in Bowling Green.

“It was a Daddy thing,” Sabrina Sonner laughed. “You do what Daddy said.”

The shop went through a total of 18 expansions over the years and has continued to prosper.

It was nominated by the McLean County Chamber of Commerce and received the “McLean County Industry of the Year” award through Kyndle in 2017.

Despite experiencing recent challenges, such as steel prices “going through the roof” and securing requested paint brands in recent years due to the coronavirus pandemic, the sisters are still thankful.

“It’s been a good business,” Sabrina Sonner said. “We’ve had some down years and some up years, but it’s kept our families fed. We have homes, we have land — so it’s provided for us.

“It keeps your brain going. No two days are the same.”

Whitaker appreciates the amount of long-time and repeat customers that have continued to work with the company over the years, with some of them being clients since the business first opened.

The sisters also acknowledge both former and current personnel have been pivotal to keeping the business thriving, including Whitaker and Hounton’s husbands — Dennie and Les — contributing to keeping the shop in good shape.

“A lot of A&S’s success is past employees and current employees,” Whitaker said. “We have a very talented ... and very dedicated workforce. If we didn’t have those guys ... we would cease to exist.

“It’s an extended family. We spend more time with our employees than our own families at home. We’ve got a really good team right now and everybody genuinely cares about the other one.”

Seven years away from six decades in business, the sisters have no plans of letting go.

“We’re striving to still be here for the 60th anniversary,” Hounton said.

“We’ll take it year by year,” Sabrina Sonner said.

“We want to keep Daddy’s legacy going,” Whitaker said. “He was the blood, sweat and tears behind
A&S.”