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Honoring The Industry's Finest

A Big Heart Pumps At Mechanical Air Service

By [Mark Skaer](#) / Editor-in-Chief. E-mail him at markskaer@achrnews.com.

SAN JOSE, CA — If the local malls need a Santa Claus to listen to children's wishes, Russ Donnici should volunteer. The beard could be a little longer; put on a red suit: perfect.

That's not a reflection on Donnici's waistband or physical appearance. In real life, the owner of Mechanical Air Service is as jolly as ol' St. Nick, and to his employees, darn near as generous.

"He is very easy to talk to," said Robert Jackson, vice president of operations. "He's always held an open door to discuss anything with him. Friendly, helpful — I don't think there is a thing he would not do for you."

Service foreman Jim Werle can't say enough about his boss of 16 years. "I interviewed with Russ and we just seemed to click right away," said Werle. "I feel I am more a part of a company than just a worker. This is the biggest difference between this company and the others I have worked for."

Even though service coordinator Andy Smith has not been employed by Mechanical Air Service for a full year, don't expect him to leave any time soon — if ever. "I turned down a couple of jobs to get this one, and I'm glad I did," he said. "People are nice to work for here."

Throw in the fact that Donnici offers a respectable financial program, a tool purchase program, occasional employee lunches and barbecues, a stable work environment, praises and raises, employee training ... well, the list could go on and on.

The biggest reason, though, that Mechanical Air Service was voted by The News as the "Best Contractor to Work For" from the West/Pacific Region lies within Donnici's chest. His heart is huge — his employees know it, the community knows it, and his customers know it too.

"I try to do the right thing," said the humble Donnici.



Russ Donnici, president of Mechanical Air Service, has started a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization that provides free and reduced heating-cooling services to the needy. *(Copyright Delgado.)*

HELPING THE NEEDY

What can you say about a contractor who is willing to perform jobs for free for low-income families?

In 1995, Donnici took caring beyond the next level by starting Outreach Heating and Cooling, Inc., a nonprofit, tax-exempt, 501(c)3 charitable organization that provides free and reduced-cost heating-cooling services to low-income families, individuals, and nonprofit organizations. He and his wife, Debi, have funded this effort themselves; their firm provides free office space, clerical support, insurance, dispatching, and bookkeeping services. Several Mechanical Air Service employees have donated service time, too. Because of the team effort, Outreach Heating has benefited more than 2,500 people since its inception.

“We are in a very affluent area, but not everyone is making money,” said Donnici. “A lot of seniors and fixed-income people own homes but don’t have a cash flow. We have run into many cases where people have had to choose between heating their home or eating a meal. This is just a way to help out.”

Helping out is just in the blood of this 50-year-old contractor, who started his business out of his garage in 1977 and turned it into a thriving company. Even though Donnici’s 25-year-old son and project manager Matt has introduced work in the high-end residential market over the last year, Mechanical Air Service is predominantly commercial, having earned its reputation in designing and building cleanrooms, server rooms, and other specialty applications.

“Although we are a medium-sized organization, our typical competitor is five to 10 times larger than we are. Yet, we are right there because of the level of expertise we have and our reputation,” said Jackson.

“Last year, we did three design-build cleanrooms for semiconductor clients, valued as low as \$40,000 to as high as \$200,000. Currently we are doing a design-build auto dealership building,” said Donnici. “We’ve been blessed over the 25 years. A lot is due to our community involvement.”

STAYING INVOLVED

To assist in hiring technicians, Donnici stays involved in the local trade school, Sequoia Institute, serving on its advisory board for the past six years. Prior to that he spent seven years on the advisory board of San Jose City College and taught there for a year.

“By being involved in schools, you do get the opportunity to select the best,” explained Donnici, who also served as a volunteer youth leader at his church for over 18 years.

It’s no surprise that Donnici belongs to several national associations, including ACCA, RSES, and AEE, while remaining active in ASHRAE. Donnici serves on several committees, including GPC-17 (which is trying to create a guideline for “Sampling of Airborne Particle Concentrations in Commercial and Residential Buildings”), and as a nonvoting member of TC 2.4 (“Particulates and Particulate Removal Devices”).

“In 1992, I coauthored a research work statement — ‘Investigate Means of Controlling Viruses by Source Removal, Ventilation, or Filtration’ — that was funded for research by ASHRAE,” he said. “And during 1992-94, I was the chairman of the Project Monitoring Subcommittee that awarded the study, monitored its progress, and accepted its findings.”



Vice president of operations Robert Jackson cannot say enough about his boss.
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His enthusiasm is contagious. His employees are willing to do anything for him because he is willing to do most anything for them.

“Working for Russ and this company, I’ve always been able to talk to him over any problems I might be having,” said Werle. “It is a really friendly attitude among everybody. We all eventually end up working on projects together. Nobody has the attitude, ‘I’m too good to do ... whatever.’ I’ve seen none of that in this company.”

Donnici is a self-confessed people person. He expects his employees to be people-oriented, too.

“Customers always come first,” said Matt Donnici. “I learned from [Russ] that if a customer calls and he leaves you a voicemail message, you return that call ASAP. Your customers are your biggest resource for revenues. You keep your customers happy and they bring you business. They tell people about you. A lot of our projects started from referrals from happy customers.”

“Gratification is knowing we’ve done a good job,” said Russ. “People remember who has taken care of them.”

EMPLOYEE ORIENTED

Employees don’t forget kindness, either. The company’s policy on pay increases is to have an annual review that includes a pay increase if specific, agreed-upon goals have been achieved.

“We also meet informally once or twice throughout the year to review the techs’ progress on their goals for the year,” said Jackson. “If additional training is accomplished or certificates of completion are done, we integrate that into the review process and many times adjust their pay incrementally during the year as an incentive.”

Mechanical Air Service offers a comp time program so employees can bank excess overtime and use it for days off or to fill in some hours during a slower period, if needed. It offers a 401(k)-type program with a company match based on company profitability. In addition, it offers a tool purchase program for employees so they can purchase tools through a payroll deduction.

“We limit overtime and try to work in some comp days off, like a Friday or Monday, so they can have a three-day weekend,” said Jackson. “We also have pizza parties to get all employees together to build a team attitude.”

Training is offered, as well. Over the last year, each employee spent an average of 40 hrs in training.

“I got a lot of training through the local wholesaler [William Wurzbach Co.],” said Donnici, where he worked for 1.5 years before entering the service field and eventually starting his own business. “I appreciate training. I had a pretty good theory background, but I didn’t have any physical, hands-on experience. But I love to read books from Sporlan, Henry Valve, Russell, Copeland, and Tecumseh. I like the education. That’s why I belong to ASHRAE. That’s also why we stress it [training] here. All of these things don’t mean a thing if you can’t apply it.”



Standing by the sitting Donnici are his son, project manager Matt Donnici, and wife, Debi, plus service foreman Jim Werle and service coordinator Andy Smith. (Copyright Delgado.)

FAMILY IN WINGS

Donnici is proud that his family will be taking over the company in the not-so-distant future. “I had my business for 21 years before my kids had any interest in it,” he said. “I never envisioned them taking it over, but we had an offer from Comfort Systems [three years ago]. I talked to my family about it and the kids expressed an interest in taking over the business.”

Twenty-seven-year-old daughter Danielle Larson is scheduled to move back from Florida to Fremont, CA, as soon as her husband, Scott, completes his 10 years of service in the Coast Guard in April. Larson looks to be the company controller; her husband will join on as a service tech. Larson worked for the company part time while doing graduate work to become a teacher. Her husband worked part time while they were stationed in the area before being transferred to Florida.

Larson is to be part of the company board along with brother Matt and Jackson, whose mother’s sister married Donnici’s brother. No one is complaining about the family ties.

“I’m content to be a worker,” said Werle. “I love having the input here. ...It’s much freer for me to just be the worker. I know the Donnici family, and there is not a bad one in the group.” Werle’s 19-year-old son, Adam, will join the company in April.

Matt Donnici has visions of expanding the business, but he’s not about to lose perspective.

“There is a limit to growth,” he said. “There are a lot of commercial companies, and there are a lot of residential companies that get too big for their own good. I think when you get too big, you start to lose contact with your guys. I don’t want that. I’d like to get us up to about 25 to 30 guys.”

For Jackson, the safety blanket is knowing that Donnici will be there if needed.

“I don’t want him to go, to be honest,” he said. “He’s just a valuable asset to the company. I know that he wants to start taking more time for himself. I mean, he deserves it. He devoted his whole life to this company.

“At one time I wanted to go on my own. But he said, ‘Hey, help me run mine and some day — you never know what the future is going to hold.’ Look at me today. I never thought I’d be running the company or some day help taking it over. It’s a helluva opportunity.”

Donnici’s focus is in helping the transition.

“I’m not going anywhere. I don’t want to be overshadowing them. I don’t want to dominate the company. I want them to have a unified vision of what they want, then operate the company in that manner. Then I can be a resource. I don’t want it to be always my company. I want it to be theirs.”

Some traditions will continue: 15 years ago, Donnici opted not to give small gifts to clients during the holidays.

“We started donating money to local charities that provide free meals to those in need,” he explained. “This year our donation fed over 2,400 people. We make the donation on behalf of our employees, clients, and vendors.

“That’s really why you’re working. Your judgment is not on how much we’ve made or how much we’ve accumulated, but what kind of impact we’ve had on other people’s lives.”

Please let us know if you know of another contractor who has started a nonprofit, tax-exempt charitable organization that provides free and reduced-cost heating and cooling services to low-income families, low-income individuals, and/or nonprofit organizations.

If you want to donate money or equipment to Outreach Heating and Cooling, Inc., contact managing director Russ Donnici at 408-954-9182 or 510-490-8661.

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