

Hartel's DISPOSAL, INC.

“LOCAL SINCE 1952”

Very few of us know our city inside and out like we think we do, at least not every nook and cranny, side street, dead-end road and alleyway. That knowledge is, however, the domain of the drivers of the region's premier refuse hauler, Hartel's Disposal Service. That's right, the garbage man! Long before AI-generated programs like Garmin and Google Maps came along, drivers had to learn and commit

to memory their different routes, one for each day of the week.

Hartel's drivers need to have the smarts to navigate these routes and safely operate a half-million-dollar truck, the physical brawn to collect and dump refuse and recyclables, the political acumen of an office manager when interacting with customers, and the personal integrity to maintain an alcohol- and drug-free lifestyle on the job.

“There's a lot of idiosyncrasies in Duluth,” notes owner Dan Hartel. “It used to take a year to train a guy to be able to let him go on his own. Now, with technology like in-cab tablets, it's anywhere from four to six months that they'll have a trainer with them before they're let free on their own, depending on what routes they are assigned.”

Hartel's Disposal is the largest private hauler north of the Twin Cities. They have been in business since 1952,



Left to right: Co-owners Luke Tellijohn, Valeree Hartel-Lamb and Kevin Hartel.



**MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY, COME HELL OR HIGH WATER, WE'LL BE THERE.
JUST LIKE THE POSTMAN: AS LONG AS THE CITY PLOWS THE STREETS.**

— DAN HARTEL, PRESIDENT - HARTEL'S DISPOSAL SERVICE

the year Dan's father Leo Hartel started Duluth and Proctor Garbage Service with a pick-up truck, a single employee and a lot of determination.

When Leo Hartel began his business he was the first hauler in Duluth. (Up to this point, many residents simply burned their trash in back-yard barrels or took it directly to local dumps.) Along with his cousin Art Walstrom, Hartel grew his business through the '60s and '70s until their sons were eventually brought into the fold.

"We've made a living off our slogan 'Local since 1952.' That's what's carried us," affirms Dan Hartel, second generation owner of the family business.

At one point there were an estimated 35 independent garbage haulers working in the city. "They all had their little areas, their little niche markets, and they were pretty confined to that," recalls Dan, who began working for his father while still in high school. For one-truck owner operators like Leo Hartel, it was a tough living.

Following in his father's footsteps, Dan Hartel started his own company, Hartel's Garbage Service, in 1983. Five years later, when Leo retired after 35 years behind the wheel, Dan acquired his father's Duluth & Proctor Garbage Service and formed a partnership with his cousin Jeff Walstrom, doing

business as Hartel's Duluth & Proctor Garbage Service. A few years later he added a second truck.

The elder Hartel handed over the keys to the truck at a time when expenses increased, regulations multiplied and national chains like Waste Management moved in. Nonetheless, Dan Hartel felt he was positioned to grow his business if he played his cards right. "We went through a big consolidation period in the '90s where myself and my partner decided to take on the big companies who were gobbling up stuff. We actually acquired more smaller haulers than they did at that

time," recalls Hartel. "We were just a small mom and pop one-truck show back then who decided to play winner-take-all poker with all the big boys; the nationals. With the help of a supportive community we have evolved to what we are today. We were the benefactor of being able to survive and grow. Every year we had big growth, and the community supported us tremendously by being local and keeping local," says a grateful Hartel.

The support of Duluthians is still crucial to the success of the business. "We're nothing if they don't support us. If the people don't pay attention



to buying local, we don't survive because we can't compete financially with Fortune 500 companies."

A FULL-SERVICE PROVIDER

As a full-service provider to the community, Hartel's Disposal collects both trash and recycling for Duluth area residential customers, offering a variety of cart sizes and free no-sort recycling, while across the bridge, Hartel's hold the contract with the City of Superior for their residential recycling program.

Duluth residents can also take advantage of Hartel's on-call yard waste collection and bulk item services. Hartel's even offers a convenient text notification option when it's time to schedule your pick up. If you have questions, the Residential drop-down menu on their website provides detailed information in an easy-to-read format.

For their commercial customers, i.e., restaurants, small businesses and industrial clients like Minnesota Power, Altec or Cirrus, Hartel's provides a variety of refuse and recycling pickup options. Depending on the need, Hartel's have trash containers ranging in size from 2 to 8 yards, recycling carts and larger dumpsters.

"Roll-off" containers from 10 to 30 yards are a perfect solution for bigger projects like debris and refuse removal, remodeling or roofing and demolition work. Hartel's customer service representatives are just

a phone call away to help commercial clients schedule bulk pickup services, food and organics collection, as well as answer questions related to fundraising and special events.

So how do they do it? It's a combination of the right equipment and a top-notch team of employees working toward a single mission. They've come a long way from a single truck with a bench seat, crank-down windows and no air-conditioning.



"We have a fleet of about 35 trucks that are regular trucks. We have a few spares that are standbys," says Hartel.

Overall, Hartel's Disposal employs around 50 workers between the hauling company, their recycling center and a fabrication facility in Proctor.

The fabrication facility came into being as a direct result of their tremendous growth in the '90s.

"We weren't able to get equipment for the customers wanting to come aboard with us," explained Hartel about the decision to manufacture their own dumpsters. "We kept getting put off by these equipment dealers, so we decided to start building

them ourselves. Every container our company has in service we've built at our fabrication facility in Proctor."

The team of six fabricators also make custom owner-branded products for external customers that include non-local haulers, counties, townships and local municipalities. Aside from the refuse industry their fabricators also work with "a handful of customers" like GPM, the pump company in Hermantown, and Industrial Welders & Machinists in West Duluth.

To keep their trucks on the road, Hartel employs a handful of mechanics who do their best to maintain and service their fleet of trucks, but because of the sophistication of today's automated vehicles, the major repairs are outsourced to the truck dealerships. The changes in technology has increased the efficiency of their services, and more importantly, has increased the comfort and work-life longevity of their employees.



"Back in the day we drove around in a rear-load truck and would walk behind somebody's house with a bucket, drop their garbage in it, put it on our shoulder and walk it out to the truck to dump it. In today's world, with the automated trucks and the refuse carts the consumer puts out, the guy pulls up and before he could have even opened the door and climbed out of the truck, he's already dumped the cart."

It was back-breaking work at the least.

The automated side-load trucks are certainly more efficient for residential trash collection, but they also provide a safe, enclosed space for Hartel's employees, reducing their risk of being injured outside the cab while subjected to the extremes of our local weather.

Today, everything is done in a controlled environment, mostly with a joystick and an automated arm that





where the driver pulls the dumpster to the truck and it dumps it compared to the front loader where he just drives up, forks and dumps; he doesn't get out of the truck. So definitely, technology has improved in the last 25 years to allow our industry to take advantage of that and allow us to be more productive and safer."

Hartel says the biggest upside to the new technology is that it is enabling employees to have a full career, something unheard of when he started out.

"We now have employees that can make it all the way into their 60s and then retire from our company. Back in the day, it was such a physical pounding that we never would have anybody make it into their 40s because their body wouldn't allow them to continue.

reaches out. Truck-mounted camera systems provide drivers with better visibility and can assist in monitoring potential illegal or hazardous dumping practices.

Commercially, Hartel's use front-load automated trucks that can lift the big dumpsters. In some cases, they still use the traditional manual, rear-load trucks for special conditions. "We don't have too much of that left, but with our geography and our terrain, like downtown, that's a rear load application because it's tight alleys, snow, lots of power lines," Hartel explained. "That's more of a manual operation



That's why there were so many owner operators because it was just too hard on people. Now," he says proudly, "we have many 25- to 30-year employees still with us that'll retire from maybe the first job they ever had."



WE'RE ALSO A TOURIST CITY, SO WE GET A LOT OF PEOPLE COMING TO OUR AREA THAT MAYBE DON'T RECYCLE AT ALL, MAYBE RECYCLE DIFFERENTLY WHERE THEY LIVE. IT'S A NEVER-ENDING, CONSTANT EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE.

— DAN HARTEL, PRESIDENT - HARTEL'S DISPOSAL SERVICE

REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

Since the inception of curb-side recycling there has always been a degree of uncertainty at the consumer level on what and how to recycle. It's an easy out for the consumer, but recycling collectors are held to a high standard of accountability.

Not surprisingly, Hartel devotes a lot of screen space on their public website in educating the public about what they can or cannot put into the waste stream.

"People move in and out of our community quite often. We're a college town, so we get a reload of



new college students every year that we have to train and teach," explains Hartel. "We're also a tourist city, so we get a lot of people coming to our area that maybe don't recycle at all, maybe recycle differently where they live. It's a never-ending, constant educational challenge."

Dan admits to being more old school when it comes to this era of consumer education, but he has a solution; the tech-fluent third generation of Hartel's to enter the business,

his son Kevin and daughter Valeree Hartel-Lamb. This past year Valeree updated the company website, (hartels.com), with a clean, sharp look. Included in the drop-down menus is a section on education, covering everything from where to place your cart, how to properly recycle batteries, non-toxic recipes for keeping rodents out of your trash, and tips for how to compost and more. The information is available in easily downloadable and printable pdf format.





FACT: DID YOU KNOW THAT THE AVERAGE DULUTHIAN DISCARDS 81 POUNDS OF CLOTHING YEARLY, CONTRIBUTING MILLIONS OF TONS TO LANDFILLS?

Think about this: did you know that the average Duluthian discards 81 pounds of clothing yearly, contributing millions of tons to landfills?

As consumers, following the Three R's (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) introduced in the 1970s are still the best way to make our world more sustainable, but if you really want to make a difference, reduce and reuse are going to have the biggest overall impact.

Hartel walks a tightrope of public opinion when it comes to recycling. His company sends 40 plus tons every day to what he calls a "smurf," a super MRF (Material Recovery Facility) in the Twin Cities.

"We went from nothing to the Three R's, recycle was the easiest, but in reality recycle is the lowest of the food chain. Reduce, by reducing what you output is the best that has the biggest impact. Reuse, taking stuff and reusing it again is the second, and the lowest form is Recycle," says Hartel. "We'd rather see you reduce or reuse before you recycle."

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Hartel's dedication to providing the best service to their customers is a testament to their hard work, professionalism and tenacity, as is their commitment to giving back to the community they serve. Hartel's Disposal donates an average of \$50,000 a year in support of a variety of community partners.

"We just did a \$75,000 donation to the Salvation Army with a match that got them another \$10,000 at Christmas time," humbly notes Hartel. "We do lots of big donations in the community. We fully believe in giving back, because, like I said, the community is why we are what we are now."

Hartel's Disposal takes requests for charitable contributions in January and June. Select the Community Involvement link under the Customer Services drop-down menu on their website for information.



As he looks ahead to retirement, Dan feels good about the future of the company. The transition to the third generation of Hartel's is well positioned to take over.

"My son runs the operations, my daughter runs the office, and basically I'm winding my way out," laughs Hartel.

In January, long-time dispatcher Luke Tellijohn was made a partner in

the business. "That's exciting," said Hartel from his pick-up truck. "It's a young generation coming in. I'm the last in the old guard of the original partner group, as we've evolved; I'm the last one. My two kids are going to be the main components but we're letting people that have been with us for many years and helped us grow this company become a part of it, and that's exciting. Luke's been a loyal,





**IF YOU WORK FOR US, YOU ARE THE BEST THAT IS AVAILABLE.
I'LL TELL YOU THAT RIGHT NOW! WE DON'T HAVE ANY WEAK LINKS IN OUR CHAIN.**

— DAN HARTEL, PRESIDENT - HARTEL'S DISPOSAL SERVICE

hardworking employee, and he now got a chance to become a partner. We're pretty excited about that."

"If you work for us, you are the best that is available, I'll tell you that right now! We don't have any weak links in our chain."

Hartel is justly proud of the business he's grown, of the work ethic and integrity of his employees. They may not have quite the steel it took

when he hit the streets but one thing hasn't changed, rain or shine, you can depend on them to be there.

"I'll tell you from being there at the beginning, it's a cakewalk today compared to what it used to be, but it's not an easy job," says the now past retirement-age Hartel. "Monday through Friday, come hell or high water, we'll be there, just like the postman; as long as the city plows the streets."

Just in case the plows fall behind, Hartel Disposal's fleet now use chains on their trucks to help them get around. The only thing that can stop them now are big snowstorms that grind everything to a halt; part of the charm of living in the Northland. **D**

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.