

“You’ve Got to Adapt”

Interview with Beth Odell

If there’s an award for multitasking, Beth Odell won it even before the pandemic. She staffs the busy office of Craig’s Total Auto Care, an essential business, that has been working to capacity most of the last year. “With all the uncertainty, more people are keeping their cars, and if you’re going to keep them, you’ve got to fix them.”

The business has been located in Homer since 1978 and their customer base spans all ages of people with all types of cars. “A lot of our customers are older and are vulnerable,” Beth adds. “We don’t want anyone to get sick.”

Beth and her father, Craig Odell, are especially careful because Beth’s mom, Rhonda, is immunosuppressed. In the past year, the only family member to contract the virus was Beth’s son Caleb, age 17. Fortunately, it was a mild case. Caleb spent the required quarantine weeks in his room and the family was then relieved to return to relative normalcy without other illness. The pandemic hasn’t changed their lives as much as some, since outdoor activities are safer and they are an outdoor-loving family.

Changes at work were another matter. For a while, customers were not allowed to wait in the lobby while their car repairs were being done. “That was hard,” Beth recalls. “It was safer, and less commotion in a small place, but I missed my customers.” Reactions to the careful precautions were mixed, and somewhat generational. Older patrons were appreciative but some of the twenty-something aged drivers laughed about social distancing and needed reminders.

Now, customers and parts delivery personnel can come in and out of the office again, but the staff is still very careful. In the lobby they require masking and social distancing. Since April 2020, their mechanics start all repairs with a disinfecting wipe down before and again after the repair. The office is frequently wiped down as well. “We wore the paint off the door, washing it,” says Beth with a laugh.

The business also sells reliable used cars, many of which they purchase from auctions in New York and Pennsylvania. During the pandemic, these auctions have gone entirely remote, meaning purchasers cannot open the car doors, see the cars move, or hear them run. “Every vehicle purchased on a prayer,” Beth notes. Another problem has been availability of parts. Routine parts have been in adequate supply, but a more specific part, like an oil filter housing, that used to take a day to arrive, now might mean a wait of up to seven weeks. Generally, though, central New York has been well-stocked for parts, compared to some areas of the state.

The biggest change, Beth says, has been making the new procedures and precautions automatic. Precautions have a cost in terms of time and supplies. In small businesses, owners must think of the bottom line every day. But overall, they have coped with the challenges of the pandemic as they continue to care about their customers and take care of their customers' cars. How would Beth describe this unusual year of pandemic life? "It's been different," she says, "and you've just got to adapt."