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**Jerry Collier,
Yvonne Collier
and Eric Collier**

**The Art of
Retrofit
Roofing**

**Zeroing
in on
Hail
Damage**

Contractor of the Year

**Commercial: Collier Roofing Co., Inc.
Residential: Roof Diagnostics, Inc.**

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Commercial

■ Posing for a group shot at a recent jobsite are Collier Roofing Co. employees (from left) Eric Collier, Heather Collier, Greg Cannon, Jerry Collier and Yvonne Collier. (Photos courtesy of Collier Roofing Co., Inc.)



2010 Contractor of the Year **Commercial**

[**Collier Roofing Co., Inc.**]

What's in a Name? For Collier Roofing, **EVERYTHING**

by Chris King

Honesty. Integrity. Financial strength. A track record of superior workmanship spanning more than 30 years.

Add it all together and you have Collier Roofing Co., Inc. The company has been serving commercial and industrial customers in Nashville, Tenn., since 1979. Owners Yvonne, Jerry and Eric Collier treat every project like their reputation is on the line — because it is. “When we install a roof, our name is on that roof,” Yvonne Collier said. “We stand behind our name because we believe our name is our most important asset.”

Collier Roofing’s quality workmanship, commitment to customers and dedication to employees has earned the company the title of *Roofing Contractor’s* Commercial Contractor of the Year.

With more than 40 employees and more than \$5 million in annual revenue, Collier Roofing is the largest woman-owned minority commercial and industrial roofing contractor in Tennessee. Yvonne admits being a woman-owned business can open some doors, but stated, “It doesn’t get you any business.”

“You still have to be the low bidder,” she said. “It has opened some doors and allowed us to get in there to bid work.



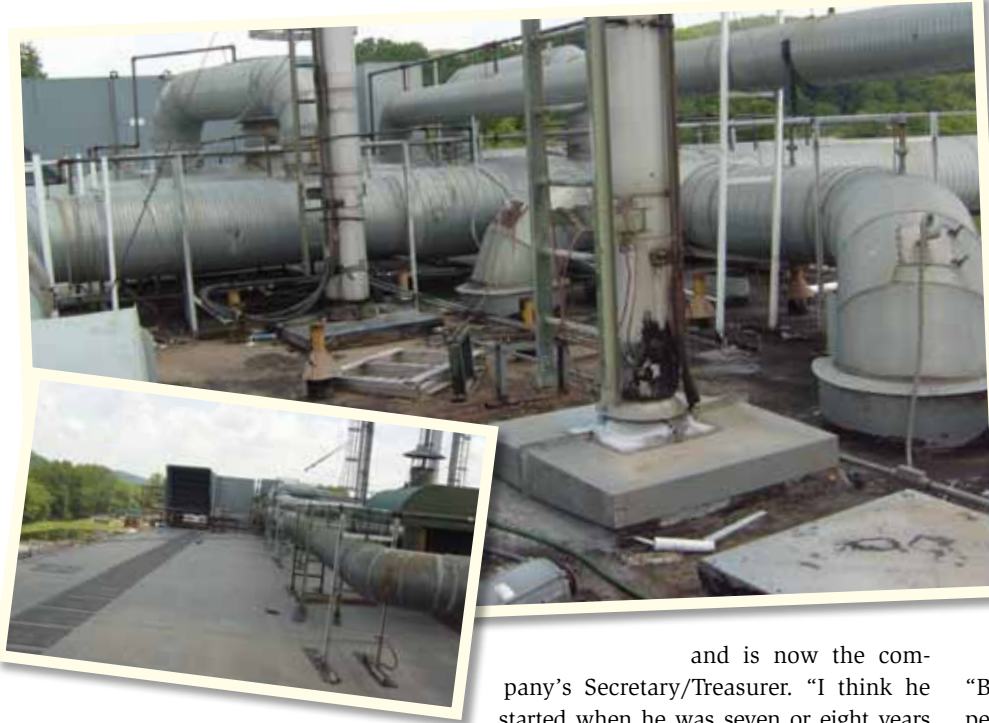
■ Collier Roofing is a true family business. It is owned by the Collier family, and it employs several third-generation workers as well.

We’ve established good relationships and built from there. It’s opened the doors for federal work, but it can be a positive and a negative. It’s a male-dominated industry. Some people don’t want to talk to me. I just go get Jerry and have him talk to them.”

“Ninety-nine percent of the time you have to be the low bidder,” Jerry said.

“Sometimes we get jobs based on our reputation for quality work.”

It’s a reputation they don’t take for granted. “It’s so important to install quality roofs,” said Yvonne. “There’s nothing more important than your company name. Your reputation depends on quality roofs. And you’ve got to take care of your name.”



■ **Left and Inset:** Collier Roofing has re-roofed sections of this industrial plant over the Christmas holiday period for two years in a row. The weather conditions, number of penetrations, and tight time frame made it one of the most difficult projects the company has ever done.

reputation, and the company makes sure everyone is well trained and responsive.

“One of the most important people in your company is the person who answers the phone,” Yvonne said. “I think it’s important that the phone be answered by a warm, live human being. And everyone must always be accessible. Jerry and I, we’re always available and customers can reach us.”

Jerry and Yvonne’s experience has helped them shape their employee training programs.

“Because we both have worked for other people, we know what it’s like to be an employee,” Yvonne said. “And we know what to expect of our employees.”

The company insists that employees have a professional image, including proper business attire. They know a positive image can be contagious. “Respect for employees carries over to respect for customers,” Yvonne said. “It’s been that way from Day 1.”

At the top of its commitment to its employees is the company’s safety program. “We go above and beyond what OSHA requires,” said Jerry. “It’s become second nature to us — safety barricades, hard hats, gloves, safety glasses.”

Every week foremen hold toolbox talks on safety, and employees sign a form documenting what they heard. Collier Roofing actively participates in the State of Tennessee Drug-Free Workplace Program and has for over 10 years.

Manufacturer-sponsored training keeps installers up-to-date. “With new products, we have the technical person from the manufacturer come in and spend a day with us,” said Jerry. “Our employees go to manufacturers’ schools. On rain days we watch videos.”

It’s matter of perspective. “I try to put myself in my employees’ shoes,” Jerry said. “With new products it’s so helpful to

and is now the company’s Secretary/Treasurer. “I think he started when he was seven or eight years old,” Jerry said. “The school bus used to let him off here at our office. Eric worked in the sheet metal shop and roofing to learn from the ground up. He now primarily focuses on estimating and project management. Eric’s wife, Heather, has managed our Maintenance & Service Department for over four years and does an excellent job with customer service. Yvonne’s brother, Greg Cannon, is the company Superintendent, overseeing all field personnel.”

Jerry oversees estimating and production while Yvonne oversees administrative duties. “I focus on the business and financial end of the business,” Yvonne said. “We’re like a little wagon — you have to keep all four wheels rolling.”

Yvonne makes sure the company is operating as efficiently as possible. From the company’s insurance agent to its banker to its IT consultant, she ensures they’re getting the right services at the right price. “With our insurance agent, for example, we have to make sure we’re charged the right rates and have the proper coverage,” she said. “You have to have people who know the industry.”

Employee Training

The employees on the front lines are the key to maintaining the company’s sterling

Starting Out

Jerry worked for a commercial roofing contractor in Nashville, learning the trade from the ground up. “I worked for another company as a field superintendent about 13 years, and decided to start my own business,” he said. “It was tough at first. We started out slowly and built it up over the years. It sounds simple, but that’s basically what it was. I looked around the industry here and thought I could do better.”

He convinced Yvonne to come aboard and run the office. “I was in commercial real estate as a property manager, and that’s how we met,” said Yvonne. “Years later, in ’91, his secretary was leaving and he asked me to come in and work ‘just part time.’ He didn’t tell me that part time was 12 hours a day.”

Jerry and Yvonne realized they complemented each other’s strengths and worked well together. “We made a great team, and we bring out the best in each other,” said Yvonne.

A family business can be rewarding. “The reward is being able to work with someone you enjoy working with and have confidence in,” said Jerry. “It’s just a pleasure working with family members — total trust.”

Son Eric Collier grew up in the business

■ **Right:** High-profile re-roofing projects include First Methodist Church, McMinnville, Tenn., which is on the National Register of Historic Places. **Inset:** Collier replaced the roof and added overflow scuppers on this high-rise office building.

see someone else work on it. Five minutes of hands-on is more helpful than 5 hours of talking about it.”

Another sign of the company’s commitment to employees: no layoffs, even in these tough economic times.

“We haven’t laid anyone off,” said Jerry “There’s been a day here or there we’ve had to have guys clean up the yard. Repair work has kept us going. It’s a combination of reputation, luck and the customer base we’ve got.”

Financial Strength

Having a tight handle on cash flow is an essential part of running a business, said Yvonne. “We’ve never borrowed any money,” she said. “It was very difficult for many years, but we were determined to not go into debt.”

That fiscal discipline has paid off. “We have never been in a situation that we have to take a job to pay for materials,” Yvonne said. “A lot of roofing contractors and general contractors buy material, and suppliers front them for six months. We don’t operate that way. Each project should pay its own way — otherwise, you don’t need it.”

Financial strength is even more important in a tough economy, she noted. “You can weather downturns so much better if you aren’t forced to take jobs. We don’t have that axe hanging over our heads.”

Keeping the company the right size is another key, said Jerry. “We make sure we have enough work to keep all of our employees busy,” he said. “We’ve been extremely lucky in that we haven’t had to lay anyone off. And we’ve even been able to bring a lot of third-generation workers into the company.”

Coping With the Economy

The dismal economy has meant some changes, though. Yvonne gave one example: “We lost a long-term office manager who was a great employee. She had the

opportunity to become a stay-at-home mom. We made the decision to not fill that position to help weather the storm. We spread the duties around and all pitched in. It was hard, but we did it.”

The economy also complicates long-term planning. “We don’t have a crystal ball,” said Yvonne. “For 18 months we carried that position, and we just hired a new person. We came in a lot of Saturdays, but it helped us make 2009 a good year.”

Paying attention to overhead costs is crucial, said Yvonne. “Small things add up,” she said. “We’re careful with office supplies. We watch every penny, stay within our budget.”

“On the production side, we increased efficiency, make sure the proper materials and equipment are at the jobsite,” said Jerry, who emphasized the importance of communication. “You’ve got to talk to your employees.”

Yvonne agreed. “Work smarter, work harder; let them know your profit margins are tight,” she recommended.

“Most of our roofing foremen realized the economy was bad,” said Jerry. “Other contractors were laying people off. I think our men understood the situation ...”

“And stepped up to the plate,” said Yvonne.



Quality Workmanship

Jerry said the end result of all that training is a top-quality installation. “Our service and quality of workmanship that goes into our projects sets us apart,” he said. “On almost every project, we’ll do something that is outside the scope of work that could prevent something from causing a leak.”

Problems with chimneys, walls, masonry or HVAC equipment can be mistaken for roof leaks, noted Jerry, so if possible it’s best to head them off before they cause a repair call. He noted 15 percent of leak calls actually involve air conditioning problems. “You have to observe what needs to be done,” he said.

Collier has had a separate repair and maintenance division for about six years. “The last 18 months it’s been extremely important, and we’ve had some very large repairs,” Jerry said. “Repairs have been more important in the last 18 months than they have ever been.”

Maintenance work is also a great source of re-roofing projects. “Our repair division absolutely generates leads for us,” he said. “It can be one or four years down the road, but we’re the first one they call. They build great relationships with the repair foremen, and we try to send the same crews to each building. It saves time and saves the owner money because they are familiar with the roof.”

Educating Business Owners

With her background in property management, Yvonne knows what her customers are worried about. “I understand the importance of a tenant and keeping a tenant happy,” she said. “It’s helped me build good long-term relationships with property managers and building owners.”

She believes educating building owners on the importance of the roof is crucial. For too many owners the roof is “out of sight and out of mind.”

“The protection starts at the top,” she said.

Understanding the customer’s needs is a key part of the process. “I understand — the bottom line is so important,” she said. “We’ve always been willing and able to do a minor repair — a \$100 or \$200 repair — to keep our clients leak free and keep our employees working.”

When it comes to bids, the company prides itself on their accuracy. “Jerry preaches to our estimators to give the best number first,” said Yvonne. “If they say, ‘Go back and sharpen your pencil,’ Jerry says, ‘We already did.’”

Property managers concerned with cash flow often zero in on the option with the lowest initial cost, but it might not be the best option if it leaves tenants complaining when utility bills skyrocket. “Sometimes the owner doesn’t even know,” Yvonne said. “What we try to do when we’re selling the job is to get our roofing report to the owner and explain it. On jobs where we deal exclusively with the property manager, we always send along two packets of information — one for the property manager and one to pass along to the owner.”

Owners are becoming more aware of the importance of insulation and its effect on future energy savings, noted Jerry. The city of Nashville mandates a minimum of R-15 by ordinance, and that’s helped increase awareness. “Owners are coming around,” he said. “Now they fully understand R-value and that it pays for itself.”

A Christmas Story

Collier Roofing goes above and beyond for its customers, even on Christmas. For

two years in a row, the company has re-roofed a section of an industrial plant during the Christmas holiday break.

The job involved tearing off two BURs, removing the metal decking, and installing new 22 gauge decking. The new system included 2 inches of polyiso insulation, half-inch wood fiber board, and a 90-mil EPDM fully adhered membrane. The timing was crucial, as a job that normally would take 30 days had to be done in 10 — including Christmas and New Year’s Day.

“It’s a heavy industrial plant with lots of piping and curbs,” said Jerry. “It was really cold. The temperature never got out of the teens.”

“It was 16 degrees,” Yvonne remembered. “The Cokes froze in 20 minutes. We went through lots of coffee and hot chocolate.”

The foreman on the job suggested that they construct a tent to provide some relief from the elements. “The foreman had a great idea, and we got some two-by-fours and tarps and built a tent and it went wonderful,” Jerry said.

“Jerry is always encouraging communication,” said Yvonne. “He’s always saying, ‘Throw out an idea and we’ll discuss it.’ Here the foreman came up with an idea that was incredibly successful.”

Yvonne praised the entire company for pulling together to complete the project on time. “We have a lot of third-generation employees, and we are like family,” she said. “You spend that much time together, you are family. If they were going to be up there, Jerry and I were going to be up there, too.”

“We paid them time and a half, and they appreciated it,” she continued. “They stepped up to the plate. That’s what they’ve done in this economic downturn, and that’s what helped us get through this.”

Not only were the employees paid time and a half for the duration of the job, they were furnished with lunch every day. On Christmas day, dinner was personally cooked and served by Jerry and Yvonne. “They ate so much we had to use a crane to get them back on the roof,” said Jerry.

“It was extremely difficult conditions, but our men worked wonderfully hard. Both times, the job was successfully completed, and we hope we get to roof a third section this year.”

Recipe for Success

Asked about the company’s recipe for success, Jerry replied, “It’s simple: Hard work. Treating people like you’d like to be treated. Good employees that are pleasant to our customers. It’s a combination of things that has allowed us to be successful.”

It all comes back to integrity. “We’re honest with our customers, manufacturers, distributors and employees,” he said. “That’s all there is to it.”

Sometimes the right thing means saying no. If customers don’t want to have the job done right, said Jerry, sometimes you have to walk away. “For example, we refused to roof over a wet, ballasted EPDM roof over structural concrete,” he said. “The owner wanted to leave the wet insulation in place. We wouldn’t do it because it would’ve been a mistake.”

Jerry explained the potential problems to the owner, and in the end Collier Roofing got the job. “I recommended a complete tear-off, and that’s what we did.”

Keeping the best interests of the customer in mind is crucial. “We talk to customers as if we own the building,” Jerry said. “We don’t do it wrong. We’ll get in our truck and drive on down the road, because it will bite you in the behind.”

The people at Collier Roofing know the company’s reputation hinges on every job, so don’t expect them to rest on their laurels. Jerry summed it up this way: “It takes a long time to build a company up, but you can run it into the ground in a very short time.”

“You can’t take success for granted,” said Yvonne. “It is essential you maintain it, work to improve it and make it the most important part of the job, every day.” **R**

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