ON LOCATION
APRIL 2007

THE TEAM
Michelle Nowka owns and operates At Your Service (www.portable-restrooms.com), a portable restroom business in East Jordan, Mich., with her husband, Frank Filardo. They have two full-time employees, Mike Lapeer and Jason Blain. Nowka’s children Grant, 10, and Michayla, 7, help out when they can.

COMPANY HISTORY
Nowka’s story is one of turning lemons into lemonade. She and her ex-husband purchased the restroom portion of Jordan Valley Rentals, a party rental company, in 2000. Nowka bought out his portion of the business, giving it a new name. With 400 TSF Company Inc. units and 26 Fleet Series units from PolyJohn Enterprises, the company services rural areas in about a 100-mile radius of St. Ignace — just over the Mackinac Bridge in Upper Michigan. About 80 percent of its business is construction, with about 20 percent special events and private party use.

MAKING CONNECTIONS
The Blissfest Music Festival job came along with the Jordan Valley company. But Nowka says keeping units clean and fulfilling promises to clients helps them retain special events such as this, the largest event her company services.

“We are all heroes when we get there,” she says. “The entertainers will come up to us to say, ‘We have gone all over. No one keeps their toilets as clean.’ ” And it’s easy for Nowka to gauge customer satisfaction — she and Frank and their two employees also camp onsite with their families, right alongside the revelers.

THE JOB
Blissfest Music Festival, now in its 27th year, is a “mini Woodstock” event of folk music, dance, food, arts and camping, held over the second weekend in July on a 40-acre farm. Last year, 3,700 people camped on the grounds; Nowka estimates attendance at the festival was more than...

Singing Their Praises

Popular Michigan folk festival and its longtime portable restroom provider make beautiful music together and ensure happy campers

By Sharon Verbeten

THE JOB: Blissfest Music Festival
LOCATION: Cross Village, Mich.
double that with additional weekend traffic and vendors.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

At Your Service provided 84 restrooms. Forty units and two ADA units were positioned up front near two music stages. Groups of eight units were scattered throughout the festival/camping grounds, and two units were set up at the festival’s “general store.” Nowka says they also bring extra restrooms to have on reserve if they should need them. Festival organizers provide sinks, made from 55-gallon drums with spigots.

The number of units At Your Service brings increases each year, as Nowka reminds organizers to not only consider the number of campers and festival attendees, but also to account for musicians, vendors and volunteers — which she estimates adds about 500 to the head count.

**KEEPIN’ IT CLEAN**

Getting ready for Blissfest each year is a time-consuming event. “We start the weekend before,” Nowka says. She and Frank — often with the help of family members — take three trailers of units to the site and set them up. The Thursday before the event, they set up camp and make sure all units are ready to go. They return at 2 p.m. Friday. “On the way there, we pass our toilet paper vendor and pick up 20 cases (48 rolls per case),” Nowka says. By midday Friday, there’s already a three-mile line of vehicles to get into the grounds.

The first cleaning is done late Friday (since vendors and festival setup staff have already been on the job). Units are cleaned twice daily with pressure washers and Green Way Products deodorants in hand. They use two Ford F-550 service trucks built by Marsh Industrial with 600-gallon waste/300-gallon freshwater tanks.

Teardown begins Monday morning, when they clean all the units and rinse out the holding tanks. They take a few units home then, and, “every day after our route, we grab 18 to 20 and bring them back,” Nowka says.

**TEAMWORK ... WITH COMPETITORS?**

“One of our largest challenges in this area is disposal of waste,” Nowka says. Without a permit to land-apply, all waste must be taken to a treatment facility located far from the Blissfest venue. Since it wasn’t cost- or time-effective to travel that far daily, Nowka says, “I called my competitor, who does toilets and septic. We hooked up with him.”

Her competitor housed a 2,200-gallon service truck on an adjacent farm; daily, Nowka transferred septage from her trucks to his, which was then taken to the treatment plant. “I’m pretty much friends with all my competitors,” she says, and it seems to have worked in her favor. “I’m a straight shooter. I’m not out to put anyone out of business.”

“The PRO’s staff stays at the campsite so that they can provide timely service.
WORDS TO LIVE BY

While the former nurse never planned on being in the portable sanitation business, her ex-husband’s departure served as a catalyst to jump-start her fervor for the job. “I needed to make sure the people in my area were getting the clean restrooms they deserved. I wanted to change the reputation of the restroom business,” she says.

Nowka’s proud to be a female-owned business, and she says her clients appreciate that too. “They think I’m putting ‘mom’s touch’ into (the restrooms),” she says. And, to that end, she tells her customers, her units are so clean, “my mother could have lunch in my restrooms.”

Michelle Nowka cleans restrooms at Blissfest.

“Upwe are all heroes when we get there. The entertainers will come up to us to say, ‘We have gone all over. No one keeps their toilets as clean.’”

Michelle Nowka

Upscale event provides impetus to lease two VIP restroom trailers

While At Your Service looks forward to servicing the epic Blissfest each year, it also gears up for the Dart for Art — a one-night fancy art auction featuring local artisans and a $250-per-plate dinner at a local equestrian club.

Two deluxe restroom trailers by Ameri-Can Engineering raise the elegance level at the event, according to At Your Service owner Michelle Nowka. The first year the company was offered the event, Nowka said organizers asked for upscale restrooms; that prompted Nowka to make a significant investment in leasing the trailers.

“They don’t have anything like that (in the area),” she says, which sealed her decision to add the luxury units to her fleet.

At Your Service uses an Island unit — which features four individual stalls with a sink. The Royale includes four individual stalls with oak doors, two sinks and a mirror on the female side; four urinals, one stall and two sinks on the male side. Both units include marble countertops, AM/FM stereo, air conditioning, hot/cold running water and other posh amenities.

For At Your Service, Dart for Art is a chance to showcase the breadth of its offerings — all in a fairly low-maintenance setting.

Nowka’s staff brings the trailers in the day prior to the event, ensures everything is working and leaves. Event staff clean the trailers, and all At Your Service has to do is pick them up the next day.

Nowka’s investment in the trailers is beginning to pay off; she also uses them for Red Cross fund-raisers, weddings and events in Michigan’s upscale marina district, and is hoping to expand service throughout Michigan.