

# dig DIFFERENT

*Think outside the bucket*



Katie Davis  
Directional Drill Operator  
Davis Underground Solutions

## DUGS DIVERSIFIES

Georgia family revives, grows  
its directional drilling business

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# DUGS DIVERSIFIES

**AFTER THEIR DIRECTIONAL DRILLING BUSINESS TOOK ITS LICKS DURING THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, THE DAVIS FAMILY REVIVED THEIR BUSINESS**

STORY: PAUL NICOLAUS PHOTOS: KAYLINN GILSTRAP AND ERIC CHRISTIAN SMITH



PHOTO BY ERIC CHRISTIAN SMITH

Davis Underground Solutions' Katie Davis and her dad, Jim, help with the company that Katie's brother Matt operates out of Powder Springs, Georgia. Katie is a directional drill operator for the company, while Jim is field operations vice president.



"I DON'T KNOW IF YOU COULD FIND A BETTER LOCATOR THAN MY DAD. **THERE'S NOBODY I TRUST MORE TO DRILL WITH ME.** HE HAS A PRESENCE IN THE DRILLING WORLD."

Katie Davis

Conduit attached to the Ditch Witch JT20 is pulled through the hole.

or fix existing safety lights without tearing up the entire lot, they're able to step in and help out.

#### CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

It's the challenge presented by this line of work that has kept Jim — who oversees field operations — hooked over the years. And their son Matt, who is the owner of DUGS, has come to appreciate that element as well.

At a recent job at a football stadium in Gainesville that was built in the early 1900s, the crew was faced with a 25-foot elevation change over 150 feet. They set up behind the stadium to shoot underneath all the bleachers and hit field level in order to install closed circuit television and a communication line. The ground conditions were hard, and with the larger of their two drills at a job site in Texas, ultimately they weren't able to get the shot in.

The result? It's now become Jim's personal mission to find a way to complete the job. "That's kind of how we've built our name, because most folks know that if you put Jim on a shot he's going to find a way to get it done, come hell or high water," Matt says. "And it's trickled down to me, and I'm sure Katie's getting there, too, where you just don't give up. We've had shots where we've tried five, six, seven times, but off the top of my head I can't think of one that we haven't gotten done."

Katie agrees that she's fortunate to work with and learn from one of the best. "I don't know if you could find a better locator than my Dad," she says. "There's nobody I trust more to drill with me. He has a presence in the drilling world. There's a respect for him. This second-generation business was able to succeed based on dad's reputation."

#### BACK TO BUSINESS

Jim Davis worked for close to 20 years for Alpharetta, Georgia-based Colonial Pipeline, where he first learned about horizontal directional drilling (HDD). Ready to venture out on his own, he and his wife, Pam, started up their own company, Davis Directional Drilling, in 1998 using retirement savings.

The business did well for several years, but when the economic downturn hit, it fell upon hard times. As a niche field, there weren't many directional drilling companies to begin with, explains Pam, and only the bigger companies had the resources needed to survive a difficult stretch of time.

When Katie Davis' father, Jim, talks about drilling, he's always said that it gets in your blood. That may not have made much sense to Katie in years past, but after joining the family-run Davis Underground Solutions (DUGS) as the company's directional drill operator, it's an expression that has taken on new meaning. "Since my first day on the job I've loved it," she says. "And I totally get what he means when he says that."

Based out of the Atlanta metro area, DUGS provides utility installation services throughout the state and beyond. They've drilled under a waterway, below the massive Interstate 285 and beneath the Georgia Aquarium. "This job we're doing right now is in Huntsville, Texas, at Sam Houston State University," says Pam Davis, who serves as company president. "It's surrounding the areas of the school so that there can be improved Internet."

Although installing conduit currently makes up a large portion of their business, DUGS also puts in water and sewer lines, and when shopping centers or other facilities are looking to upgrade

Davis Underground Solutions president Pam Davis and her son Matt at their home office in Powder Springs, Georgia. Matt owns the company.

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Matt Davis

In 2010, Jim made the difficult decision to close the business. "When we shut it down, everything we had was paid for and we didn't have any debt," he says. "So at least it was a relatively simple process to pull the plug."

After enduring a couple of years with little work, Jim eventually decided to venture up to North Dakota to install pipelines. In the meantime, Matt handled a job here and there using the family's Ditch Witch JT1720. During his high school years and even a little bit after college he had worked for the family business, so he was already familiar with the line of work.

"Matt has never met a stranger, probably never will," explains Pam. "He's just got that personality where he knows a lot of people and a lot of people know him. He's got that personality that you need to get out there and meet and greet." Ultimately, this relationship building laid the groundwork for what was to come.

"From 2010 to 2012, you couldn't pay somebody to let you go and drill somewhere," Matt says. "People just weren't building infrastructure. At the end of 2012 and into 2013, though, it was almost like a light switch turned on. As the economy started to uptick just a little bit, the phone started ringing again."

Davis Underground Solutions (DUGS), a reinvention of Davis Directional Drilling, was born. As the jobs started rolling in with greater frequency, Matt convinced Jim to come

back home from North Dakota in November 2013 once he secured a month-long \$20,000 project with good margins. He flew up to meet Jim, they drove back together and went straight to work the very next day.

"Every penny that we made we poured right back into the business," Matt says. "We kind of took a leap of faith to use some credit and get the drill up and running again." From there, they picked up a couple of larger projects and have kept the momentum going ever since.

#### BEYOND FAMILY

In addition to the four core family members now involved, Jim and Pam's son Pope and his wife, Tiffany, also step in to provide occasional help when needed. With an MBA and a CPA between the two of them, their professional

*(continued)*



PHOTO BY KAYLINN GILSTRAP

## Davis Underground Solutions

Powder Springs, Georgia



**OWNER:** Matt Davis  
**EMPLOYEES:** 9  
**SERVICES OFFERED:** Directional drilling for electrical, gas, telephone/communications, water and sewer lines  
**SERVICE AREA:** Throughout Georgia and the southern states  
**WEBSITE:** [www.dugs.biz](http://www.dugs.biz)

advice has come in handy along the way, particularly when considering a big project or a large capital expense.

“Pope grew up working in it, too, so he understands how everything works,” Matt says. “He’s able to bring more of an aerial view to our decision-making process, which at times has proven invaluable.”

DUGS also has three non-family employees who help round out the crew. Having a third worker at a job site is critical, Pam explains, and having a fourth is great, too, in order to ensure that the drilling operations run smoothly.

“None of this is rocket science,” she adds. “It’s just a matter of working together smoothly, because the better we work, the more footage we get in, and the more footage we get in, the more money we make because it doesn’t take as long. If everybody’s doing what they’re supposed to be doing, it’s like a well-oiled machine.”

At the moment, DUGS has reached a point where it could potentially bring several additional workers aboard. “Right now we could probably hire four more,” says Pam. “We have another drill and just can’t man it right now. We just can’t find enough people to work.”

As the business continues to search for and add employees, it does so with the intention of growing right along with those new hires. “If you’re going to come to work and be there on time and do a good job, then we want to share with you,” Pam says. “You’re going to get a good salary, and we’re going to do everything we can to include you. As we move up, you’ll move up, too. If you’re going to come and do your best for us, then we’re going to do our best for you.”

## MERGING GENERATIONS

It’s easy to get caught up in one specific area of the drilling industry, Matt acknowledges. Right now fiber and telecommunications are really picking up, and there are large, long-term projects available, so it’s easy to devote time and attention to that alone.

But the tough times experienced by Davis Directional Drilling in years past means that this time around the family is working hard to put safeguards in place, even when the jobs and cash flow are rolling in. Matt’s vision for the company’s future is to make sure they’re better diversified, handling jobs that veer into not only telecommunications but also into the electrical, plumbing and wastewater industries.

Some of these areas could provide consistent work even during an economic slump, Matt explains. For example, many municipalities will invest in their infrastructure during a recession because they can handle it at a better rate than when the economy is booming. In addition, if parking lot lights go

Katie Davis operates the company’s Ditch Witch JT20 directional drill while her dad, Jim, looks on.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY DITCH WITCH

Davis Underground Solutions uses a JT25 directional drill similar to the one pictured here for many of their jobs. The unit — which they named Lucy — has an exclusive rotational drive with 4,000 ft-lbs of torque and 27,000 pounds of thrust and pullback.

## New equipment, added capabilities

The Davis family knows all too well that every piece of equipment is crucial. “You can’t drill without water, and you can’t get the water without the pump and motors running,” explains Katie Davis. “And you’ve got to have a mud vac, so if you took one of those away we wouldn’t be able to drill.”

“It’s all about a system,” Jim Davis adds. “You’ve got to have all the pieces and parts to make it work.” Even so, he acknowledges that the drill is the biggest piece of equipment and probably the most important. And with the addition of a Ditch Witch JT25 horizontal directional drill, DUGS has added a whole new level of capability to its business within the last year.

“We nicknamed the new drill Lucy because she’s always holding the football out there for Charlie Brown and jerking it back at the last minute,” he chuckles.

The work Lucy can handle is no laughing

matter, though. It features an exclusive rotational drive with 4,000 ft-lbs of torque, 27,000 pounds of thrust and pullback, and a 130 hp Tier 4i Cummins diesel engine. It can handle the installation of utility pipe and cables up to 12 inches in diameter at lengths up to 500 feet.

And DUGS put it to the test as they installed 12- and 14-inch steel casing pipe — both 450 feet long — underneath railroad tracks. It was a job they just wouldn’t have been able to tackle without their new drill.

“One of the things I like about the Ditch Witch is that you can operate it with a single joystick,” Jim notes. And the level of service makes a difference, too. “Our Ditch Witch dealer has just been super to us as far as servicing our equipment, and if something breaks down they are right on it to help us get through the crisis. That means a lot.”



PHOTO BY KAYLINN GILSTRAP

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Jim Davis, field operations vice president, uses the TK6 guidance system (Subsite Electronics) to track the Ditch Witch JT20 directional drill location.

PHOTO BY KAYLINN GILSTRAP

out at a large corporation they have to be fixed because it's a liability — downturn or not.

"I keep telling everyone that we're not just a directional drilling company," Matt says. "In order to move up to that second-tier-sized company, we need to be able to offer a turnkey solution to a lot of these jobs."

The change in business name is one indication of a desire to move into these different areas and meet customer needs in a variety of ways, Katie explains. "Daddy was great at directional drilling and he's still great at it, but bringing this new business in under the name of Davis Underground Solutions shows that we're willing to go the extra mile. We want to meet all of your underground needs.

"We have two generations of drills," she adds. "And we have two generations in the family business, and I think merging them and combining them is part of our future and our vision." ▼

**Read more** about Katie Davis and Davis Underground Solutions online at [digdifferent.com](http://digdifferent.com)



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