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[phcnews.com](http://phcnews.com)



# All-American contractor balances work, family and R and R

Ask Minnesota plumbing and hydronic contractor Eric Aune for an opinion about the economy, or his trade, family or favorite recreation and you're sure to get an intelligent response.

According to Aune (pronounced Awe-nee), the many-sided issue of the economy's condition is a dead and beaten horse. "I wish we'd see more effective action and the contributions of individuals, companies and politicians united in the cause to make a difference, big or small. What we need is to be proactive and committed."

Aune takes this to heart when running his own small firm. Aune, 33, is a father of two young sons and husband to a lovely wife; he's a man with his fair share of breadwinner responsibilities.

Aune has done well, all things considered, through the toughest of times. Work hasn't been exactly steady over the past 18 months, but when it comes, he's putting in long hours. That adds a measure of stress all its own, but if he worries, he tends to think about bigger things, such as our economic condition and how it could be improved.

"Right now, with our economy down on its knees, I think it's important to buy American. Even better, I'm locally conscious whenever I can be," he said. "It's a thread that runs through my personal and professional life." From his fishing equipment to the gear that he installs on jobs, Aune does his best to keep his money in the U.S. and even closer to home if he can.

Aune started his own business, Aune Plumbing LLC, in 2004. He runs a one-man shop, specializing in custom mechanical systems in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. He hires subcontractors whenever they're needed. As a United Associations (UA) green-accredited plumber, solar and hydronic systems are his focus. He also does water auditing, an emerging discipline that helps



Since opening the doors to his one-man shop in 2004, Aune has provided personal service in the green plumbing and heating field.

home and business owners reduce water use. Though he spends most of his time working on residential systems in the Twin Cities area, work occasionally takes him to northern Minnesota, chiefly to install complex heating systems in "Lake Country" vacation homes.

After high school, Aune completed an apprenticeship with Dunwoody College in Minneapolis and then went to work for Hutton

## Personal life

"I really like having only my family, myself and my customers to take care of," explained Aune. "Being a one man shop allows time for me to attend my boys' activities, to participate in school events and to spend time with the family when I'm needed."

At this time of year, the plumbing and heating contractor heads into

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& Rowe in Anoka, Minn. "It was a good company with 15 journeyman plumbers," said Aune, "but when they shut down operations, I set out on my own."

the Minnesota outback to cast a line as often as he can: It's his personal "pressure relief valve." Heather, his wife of 11 years, and their two boys, enjoy fishing with Dad. Ethan, 9,

and Jacob, 7, go out on the water with their father at every opportunity. Heather doesn't go quite as often, capitalizing on the opportunity to relax while her husband and boys are having "guy time" on the water.

### Trainer and student

For the past four years, Aune has been a UA instructor, teaching plumbing apprentices in the Minneapolis and St. Cloud areas for Plumbers Local 15. Each year there are typically 10 to 20 adult students in the class.

Aune is working toward an Associate's Degree in construction management. He's involved in the UA Instructor Training Program each August in Ann Arbor, Mich., a trade teaching certification course. The weeklong course involves 40 hours of training. Other recent trade courses include pipe welding, hydronics, green plumbing and green systems awareness certification training.

Aune also attends local training sessions provided by Minneapolis-based manufacturer's representative firm, Mondale & Associates. This year, John Barba, Taco's contractor training and trade program manager, is offering the Compleat Boiler Room and a new hydronic controls class; Aune has registered for both of these.

Barba also offers Webinars that can be found at the new Taco FloPro Team website. The sessions cover everything from pump sizing and head loss to combustion analysis. Aune makes use of his schedule flexibility to catch as many of these as possible.

"If John is going to share, for free, the product of millions of research dollars, and 20-plus years of experience with contractors across the country, am I going to take him up on that offer? Ya, sure, you betcha!" Aune quipped, like a line right out of the cult classic, Fargo.

### One heck of a jobsite

Over the past couple of years, Aune has been working at a large custom home in Northern Minnesota. The client has been building his own vacation/retirement house on the bank of Big Sandy Lake. The home, which incorporates a dual-fuel boiler connected to in-floor radiant heat, will have roughly 4,400 square feet of heated living space. The two-story home has vaulted



*With their spare time, Aune and his wife Heather enjoy taking their two boys, Ethan and Jacob, fishing on one of the countless Minnesota lakes.*

ceilings, requiring a little creativity to insulate properly. The owner chose BASF closed-cell spray foam for the roof deck and all of the walls.

"The job is a work in progress, with only three of the five existing zones in operation at this time," said Aune. "There are plans to add two or three zones in the future for hydronic towel warmers." At this point, the building envelope is complete. What remains undone is some drywall and flooring work and portions of the heating system, which Aune works on as building progress permits.

When the job is complete, the in-slab garage and basement radiant heat will total about 2,000 sq. ft. There's also about 1,250 sq. ft. of staple-up on the main level, 500 sq. ft. of staple-up for the loft and 700 sq. ft. of staple-up in the bonus room above the garage.

"I knew I wanted to go with radiant at the lake house," said the owner. "Our other home has a standard duct system, and the floors are always cold." His wife and daughter agreed wholeheartedly with the decision. The family uses the property as a summer getaway, and a winter hunting and snowmobiling destination.

### The getaway's hydronic recipe

For the big lakeside home, hot water for the radiant loops is provided by a modulating electric boiler as the primary source; a smaller gas condensing boiler serves as the backup. Also part of the system is a 105-gallon indirect storage tank. With the zones that

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*Taco's John Barba and Eric Aune work on calculating a heat load for an upcoming job using Taco FloPro Designer software.*





For Aune, mobile communications is the key to staying in touch with contractors, homeowners, distributors, family and friends.

are currently complete, the system calls for 150 gallons of 50/50 glycol.

"It's an easy, sensible precaution to take, given the possibility of a midwinter deep freeze when the homeowners aren't there to monitor power and system performance," explained Aune. "It also helps that Minnesota mandates glycol, indoors and out, for seasonal-use homes."

Other key system components — all carefully selected and installed — include several Taco 007 and three-speed pumps, one Taco 008-VDTF6 variable speed delta T circulator, five Taco Zone Sentry valves and a 4900 series air eliminator, a Taco ZVC406-3 six-zone valve control and an SR504

switching relay, one Taco iSeries three-way mixing valve with outdoor reset, Viega SS ProRadiant manifolds and a bushel of Viega

ProPress copper fittings. "I prefer modern, but simpler, systems," added Aune. "And I

Growing up, Aune took Minnesota's bountiful fishing opportunities for granted. When it came time to teach the boys to fish, he realized just how fortunate he was to live 15 minutes in any direction from some of the nation's best freshwater fishing.



Before purging a newly-installed system, Aune verifies that the air separator is closed.

believe in Taco's Delta T hydronic strategy all the way. Taco's new Zone Sentry zone valves, paired up with the 008-VDT variable speed circulator, make an incredibly energy efficient recipe. Plus their bypass valves, air elimination technology and hydro separators are among the best available. I know: I've replaced a ton of other zone valves with Taco gear."

The sum total of it at the lake home, says Aune, is one "really fine hydronic machine with a carefully-considered parts list."

But when business for the master mechanic slows to a point that he can build in some R and R, he heads for larger volumes of water. Aune has an 18-ft. aluminum walleye boat. "I chose the boat I have because it was made right next door, in New York Mills, Minn. As far as my tackle and rods are concerned, at least 50% of the gear was

produced either here in Minnesota or in Wisconsin.

"My boys love to reel in panfish. For them it's all about catching. For me, it's the walleye, Minnesota's state fish," said Aune. His personal best was an 11-pounder he caught in Minnesota. "I've caught slightly larger ones in Canada, but that doesn't count. Hey, I just like to keep it local."

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"I'm fortunate to have found a profession that inspires me," concluded Aune. Fortunately, my work doesn't take me far from home, and my "pressure relief valve" is as close as my fishing gear and the nearest body of water." ●