

Making a Difference

There are some people who carry with them a sense of centeredness and joy, and can, just by their presence, effortlessly impart those feelings to others they meet. They walk into a room and suddenly everyone, without really knowing why, feels better. Letitia Hanke, owner of ARS Roofing, Gutters & Solar in Santa Rosa, California, is such a person.

By Jim Brumm

Letitia Hanke grew up in Hidden Valley Lake, California. As one of just a small handful of African-American students in her community, Letitia was often brutally teased and bullied.

“I used to hide on the playground,” says Letitia. “It was terrible. But one day a music teacher came and found me. She asked if I would like to learn to play music and meet some new people. That opened up a whole new world to me, and it changed my life.” She smiles and says, “You hear about random acts of kindness; that was one.”

Letitia learned to read music and quickly became so proficient on the trumpet that in eighth grade she became the only elementary school student allowed to play with the high school band.

“When I played music,” says Letitia, “all my worries went away. I wanted to be a rock star! Later,” she adds, laughing, “I taught myself to play piano by listening to Yanni tapes. Remember Yanni? I’d play the cassette tape for a few seconds, then stop it and learn that part on the piano, then start the tape again and learn the next part.”

After high school, she attended Sonoma State University, studying music and recording engineering, and took a jazz class that required her to perform live in front of an audience each week. Soon, she started receiving invitations from local bands to sit in as a vocalist at their gigs. It seemed as though a career in music was in the cards, but fate stepped in.

In her junior year of college, Letitia took a job as a receptionist at a prominent roofing company, Associated Roofing Services. Shortly after starting, the office manager left, and the owner asked Letitia if she wanted the job. Loving a challenge, she accepted.

“I was suddenly working eighty-hour weeks,” says Letitia, “trying to learn the job.” She managed the company for four years. Her boss then asked if she would consider buying the business if he retired.

She realized that if she were to buy the business, she had a lot more to learn. So, for the next four years, Letitia worked in the field



as a roofer, learning the trade hands-on, up on hundreds of roofs, a female in a male world.

“I’m glad to not be doing that anymore,” says Letitia, laughing. “But I really loved it up there. I always felt, and I still do, that we were creating art. You see a cruddy roof, and then we come and lay a beautiful, white PVC membrane. Or on pitched roofs, the patterns of the shingles—I see it as art.”

Letitia earned her roofing contractor’s license and started her own roofing business in 2004. She invited only the best of the workers to come with her to the new company. Since taking the helm, Letitia has built ARS into one of the most successful roofing



Letitia and ARS employees receiving the award for 2015 Small Business of the Year.

companies in the area, with a sterling reputation for quality, transparency, and great customer service. Over the last 15 years she has secured additional licensing for gutters, waterproofing, and solar.

“The thing I love most about doing this job is the look on my clients’ faces when we’re done, knowing that they are now safe

“I want to be the person offering the random act of kindness, and perhaps changing someone’s life for the better.” - Letitia Hanke

and secure under their new roof, just like I felt when my teacher rescued me way back when. That’s what I do; I bring a sense of security to my clients.”

ARS now has 24 full-time employees, and Letitia is careful to only hire those who fit the ARS culture and philosophy.

“I hire people who understand that this isn’t just a job,” she says. “We’re bringing happiness. Do they smile? Do they love what they do? My crews are all uniformed and honest, and talented. They clean up the job sites every day, and greet the customer when they arrive, every time. The foreman introduces himself and lets the customer know they can come to him for anything,

anytime. Customers love my salespeople because they have integrity and are honest. If you don’t need a roof yet, we’ll tell you. We’re not about gimmicks, and we’re not just there for the sale. We know you’ll call us when you’re ready.”

Finding the right employees and training them well has paid off. ARS has very low turnover. Many employees have been there over 15 years, and some over 20.

ARS specializes in several areas: commercial or residential pitched or flat roofs, composition roofs—shingle, tile, or metal—gutter installation and repair, coatings for roofs or decks, and solar technology.

“I used subcontractors before and didn’t like their work,” says Letitia. “Our crew would have meetings and talk about all the

things we didn’t like about other companies, and then do the opposite. Now we have the licenses, the experience, and the skills so our customers can get everything they need with one company. Plus, they can call just one number with any questions.”

In 2012, Letitia started “Give Back to Save our Schools,” a program that donated one percent of the profits from each roofing job to the customer’s school of choice. In 2015 she founded the non-profit LIME Foundation (LIME is her son, Emil’s, name spelled backwards. He was also bullied at school, and often called “Lime instead of Emil.”).

The LIME Foundation has three core goals: to mentor and bring vocational training to young people—especially young women—to find successful careers in the trades, to help seniors learn to live healthier, happier lives through socialization, nutrition, and exercise, and to bring positive, structured activities to at-risk youth through music, theater, and dance. Up to five percent of ARS’s profits are donated to the Foundation. Through fund raising and events, the community has been hugely supportive of the Foundation’s goals. See more at www.thelimefoundation.org.

Letitia still plays music; she has a recording studio at home where she writes

and records her own instrumental compositions. She plays classical piano, and sings jazz and blues. She describes herself as very adventurous, loving the outdoors, camping and hiking—“Anything near water.” She radiates enthusiasm, kindness, and compassion. Spending time with her leaves one feeling energized and uplifted.

As CEO, Letitia has not only spectacularly succeeded in a male-dominated business, she has done so with aplomb and grace,



Letitia Hanke with California governor Gavin Newsom

delivering quality work to her satisfied customers, and offering her employees honest work with a living wage and a secure future, all while taking every opportunity to give back to her community and serve the disadvantaged. When you do business with ARS, you, too, are giving back to the community. It doesn’t get much better than that.

“I will spend the rest of my life trying to make a difference,” says Letitia. “I want to be the person offering the random act of kindness, and perhaps changing someone’s life for the better.”

**ARS Roofing,
Gutters & Solar**
3327 McMaude Place
Santa Rosa, CA 95407
707-584-5900
www.arsroofing.com