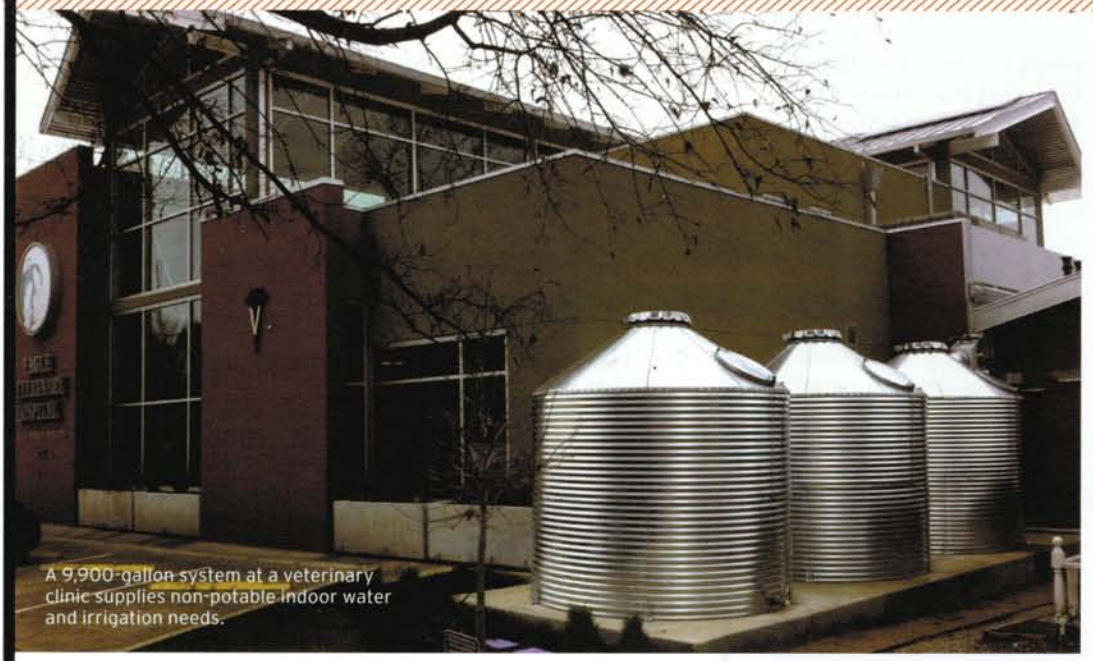

A 9,900-gallon system at a veterinary clinic supplies non-potable indoor water and irrigation needs.

When it Rains, Where Does the Water Go?

As founder of a company built directly around that question, Chris Maxwell-Gaines tells the story of Innovative Water Solutions, and how a side job with a friend morphed into a booming business **BY DAVID HUDNALL**

TEN YEARS AGO, CHRIS MAXwell-Gaines and Blake West met in Suriname, the small South American country. They were working for the Peace Corps, and while there, they observed how the Surinamese relied heavily on rainwater-harvesting systems for their water supply. Eventually, they both moved back to Austin, Texas. Maxwell-Gaines found a job with an engineering firm, and West worked for a nonprofit. But they continued to share a belief that rainwater harvesting was an approach that could be a feasible business plan here at home.

"We got together one night and started talking about it and found that we really had the same mindset about things," Maxwell-Gaines recalls. "So we started doing some research. We saw that there was a home-and-garden show coming to Austin the next weekend, and we inquired if there were any discounted booths available. There was. We showed up and started pitching our idea to people, and that was the beginning of everything."

Innovative Water Solutions, LLC (IWS) began primarily as an installation business, equipping residential and commercial clients with rain harvesters. "We kept our day jobs for a year and did it on the side," Maxwell-Gaines says. "It was a lot of me and Blake digging ditches and rolling tanks into place." But the company quickly took off, and over the years, it has morphed into more of a design-build firm for both residential and commercial projects. Today, IWS employs 11 people, does installations throughout Texas, and designs and consults on a national scale.

That IWS is located in Austin has been fortuitous; the Texas capital is one of the only cities in the United States that offers a rebate for rainwater-collection systems (for more of what sets Austin apart, check out our feature story on p. 38).

Just west of Austin is a steadily growing development that lacks a connection to the municipal water supply, which means residents must either drill a well—a prospect that presents a variety of water-quality challenges—or install a large-scale rainwater-harvesting system to supply their own water. "It's a very captive market for what we do," Maxwell-Gaines says. "People here like the idea of going out and buying land outside of town on which to build their dream house. And there's also a culture here in Texas that responds to the sense of ownership our products provide—a 'My land is my land, my water is my water' type of thing."

Roughly 60 percent of IWS's jobs are residential, with commercial work making up the remaining 40 percent. Half of the residential systems it installs use the rainwater for drinking water; the other half are for irrigation only. "On a typical job, we're consulting with the homeowners or builders about what kind of system is appropriate, what size of storage tank they need," Maxwell-Gaines says, noting that they also offer greywater-reuse systems, but they're not as popular since Texas homebuilders aren't yet required to dual-plumb. IWS also offers highly efficient landscape-irrigation systems and installation.

As for many in the building market, institutional education projects are making up an increasing percentage of IWS' s revenues. "We installed systems at five schools this past summer," Maxwell-Gaines says. "Three of them had 100,000-gallon systems. Water-conservation systems at schools is something we're anticipating will be more and more common on the national landscape."

IWS recently installed an AC-condensate-collection system at the Austonian Tower, a 56-story condominium building that's the tallest condo west of the Mississippi. This system is estimated to collect more than 1 million gallons of water to use for irrigation purposes on the 10th-floor amenity deck. At Texas A&M University in College Station, the company installed a 60,000-gallon system that was stylishly incorporated into the architecture. In addition to these projects, IWS is set to unveil an integrated, pre-engineered product for design professionals that will make it easier for architects and engineers to incorporate its water-conservation systems into their projects.

"We're concentrating not just on supplying auxiliary water but also on water demand," Maxwell-Gaines explains. "We're trying to find the best way to put systems together to achieve the most sustainable outcomes." **GBQ**