

Let's Talk Home Improvement

"Be sure your fire happens only in the firebox, not the chimney!"

"It's a fact," says CSIA Certified chimney sweep, Barry Belyeu. "More people depend on their fireplaces and woodstoves or inserts for heat during economic downturns. It's imperative that these appliances are safe for use; it could be a matter of life or death." Belyeu, founder and president of Chimney Chasers, adds that he has composed a number of insurance quotes over the past few years for homeowners who have experienced a chimney fire, and that – thankfully – there were no injuries experienced in any of them.

While some people see images of Dick Van Dyke's version (*Mary Poppins*) when they think of a chimney sweep, today's sweep utilizes modern technology and a good amount of education to prevent chimney fires that can destroy a home – or worse – in minutes. Belyeu began cleaning chimneys on a part-time basis over 20 years ago, before he was aware of the Chimney Safety Institute of America (CSIA) or the fact that with a chimney the word "safe" is a relative term. The CSIA credential is acknowledged by a growing number of industry organizations, insurance underwriters, local, state and federal agencies as the measure of a chimney sweep's knowledge about the evaluation and maintenance of chimney and venting systems.

"Becoming CSIA Certified served to show me just how much I didn't know before," he says. "In an unregulated industry such as this, there has to be some type of criteria that sets apart the professionals so that the consumer can make an educated choice," he stated. Belyeu is frequently asked how often (and why) a chimney should be inspected or swept. He notes that there are various reasons, but that the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends that a chimney be inspected annually and cleaned as needed. Most chimney fires could be eliminated with that one piece of advice. "You want to be sure your fire happens only in the firebox, not the chimney!" advises the sweep.

Other times when an inspection should be performed include: immediately after a chimney fire or whenever the service of the chimney is changed (converting from gas logs to wood-burning, adding a stove or insert, etc.). And, while one should always have a Home Inspection performed prior to buying a home, it's impossible for a home inspection to determine with any degree of certainty whether the flue is free of defects. Special equipment is necessary to view the entire chase, and critical knowledge is required to diagnose what one sees. The NFPA recommends that all chimneys be inspected before a home is bought or sold; the National Chimney Sweep Guild (NCSG) suggests having a Certified Chimney Specialist conduct a Level II inspection prior to closing. (Visit www.csia.org and www.ncsg.org for homeowner tips and information.)

Chimney Chasers performs work for several Realtors, Property Management companies and Condominium/Homeowners Associations throughout Fayette County and Metro South Atlanta, and works closely with home inspectors. Commercial and residential



Barry Belyeu in front of the outdoor fireplace (with hand forged crane) his company built for Flat Creek Baptist Church.

services run the gamut from dryer vent cleaning (another fire hazard) and installation of woodstoves, inserts and gas logs to video inspections, restoration of chimneys in historic homes, relines and construction of outdoor fireplaces. Custom caps, pans, shrouds and other accessories are also installed. Insurance and real estate documentation is another specialty for which a Certified Sweep is recommended; homeowners are assured of getting well-researched, accurate information (and a quote) that is acceptable for legal transactions.

Last fall, Chimney Chasers was commissioned by Flat Creek Baptist Church in Fayetteville to build a large fireplace (flanked by commemorative brick walls) for its outdoor pavilion, after a church member had used the company to reline his chimney. A novice blacksmith, Belyeu hand forged a custom fireplace crane that is both decorative and useful for the project. Various local designers (and even an engineer) use the company for consultation on their own projects.

"We've had some callers inquire about the difference in pricing among the few chimney sweep companies on Atlanta's southside," offers Deborah Belyeu, the Business Manager and Barry's wife, who says some operators are charging 1998 prices and are not Certified. "Once they understand the differences, they usually don't mind paying a little more for a lot more confidence! With proper equipment, insurance and continuing education – not to mention fuel costs – there's a threshold below which a legitimate business can't go." The CSIA Code of Ethics assures customers that a Certified sweep will be present on every job; beware of companies that attempt to mimic CSIA or NCSG.

Both masonry chimneys (those built

of solid brick from the ground up) and pre-fabricated chimneys have numerous parts that require attention during an inspection (see illustrations); ask for written documentation, says Belyeu. There may be an extra charge for a video inspection, if and when there are circumstances that warrant one. Most sweeps will gladly offer to show homeowners digital photos of what they're seeing on the rooftop when more work is required. What are some of the issues that a Certified Sweep can diagnose and repair? They include: water leaks in or around the fireplace, smoke coming back into the house, foul odors, the chimney's ability to contain the products of combustion before or after a chimney fire, and the condition of the top of the chimney (whether there are loose or missing bricks and/or the condition of the crown, etc.).

Most consumers think of having the chimney cleaned during the fall and winter months, so the Belyeus advise customers to check for specials during the "off season" – or spring and summer – when business is slower. That's also a great time to have the gutters cleaned or covered. Several years ago, Chimney Chasers added LEAVESOUT® gutter covers (and gutter cleaning) to its repertoire. Belyeu notes that it was a natural transition since he's already on the roof, and that the Lifetime Warranty on the covers gives him confidence in the product. He adds that www.leavesout.com lists the many benefits, and has examples. Likewise, www.chimneychasers.com has been recently updated, and offers specials for readers.

This year marks 14 years of Certification under the Chimney Chasers logo; with his ten years' prior experience, Belyeu can claim a total of 24. "We've been blessed to do business in our local community with people we know, and we appreciate them," the couple agrees. "Even in this mobile society, many of our customers have been with us since the beginning, leading us to believe we've passed the litmus test of repeat business."

[Illustrations are from "The Homeowner's Guide To Chimneys, Fireplaces and Woodstoves," co-authored by James P. Brewer and Ashley H. Eldridge. They are reprinted with the author's permission.]

