

Brown says family firm thrives on balance, ethical standards

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The scoop on Ron Brown

Who is he?

President and chief executive officer, **Brown Construction Inc.**

The essentials

Age: 45

Native of Davis, lives there with wife, Mary, and their six children

Education: Bachelor of science degree in construction management from California State University Sacramento

Career: Hired at **NVE Construction** after graduating in 1986, worked on prisons and commercial buildings; joined Brown in 1988

His favorite things

- Childhood dreams: "To design cars, trains and aircraft."
- Mentors: "My parents. They didn't criticize me. They let me fail and let me succeed."
- Alternate career: "If I could choose another ... I'd be a doctor or own a motorcycle shop."

The year was 1988, and Bill Brown was getting ready to retire after 24 years of running his construction business. That's when his son Ron joined the firm.

The elder Brown's plans changed. "There was a project he didn't want to bid on, and I wanted to," Ron Brown recalled about deciding to work with his dad. "It was the best thing I could have ever done. I got to work side-by-side with my father for 16 years. With the two of us together, the business was just sort of rejuvenated."

When the pair started working together in 1988, there was \$1 million in work on the books and five employees. Today, annual volume for 2008 is projected at \$150 million, and the firm juggles 35 to 40 projects at once, with about 20 under construction. The West Sacramento company employs 100 to 200 employees and does work throughout California and in Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Montana and Nevada.

"My father concentrated on apartments," Brown said. "His forte ... was mixed-use, mine was commercial buildings. During the 1980s, we kept growing while others were struggling. It just kind of happens when you're not looking."

How's your business faring during the downturn?

We tend to look 18 to 24 months ahead, so we're now working on projects that I started before the downturn took hold. Looking through the year 2010, we look very healthy.

I got into a new market a couple of years ago, that of assisted living and assisted care Alzheimer's (disease) facilities. We've been doing them for several years, but we're expanding in that area. When you see what some existing facilities are like, they're pretty dated and sad. Now, the market is showing some very nice facilities, and I like the market. We're able to work on some state-of-the-art complexes serving an important need. We're working on one right now in Sparks, Nev., that will be beautiful.

How do you keep a competitive edge?

By being honest and committed to the type of work we do. I believe in high ethical standards. I believe in treating the people I work with with respect. But my overall business philosophy is maintaining a balance between family and work. And family always comes first.

What are you most proud of in your work?

I'm proud when our projects serve the community and contribute to the wellness of the community. One facet of our company that I enjoy is that we take on a community-service project each year, donating our time and services to build something for a nonprofit group, such as the River Oak Center for Children. We helped build that for children in crisis.

It's nice to do projects locally. We did the West Sacramento civic center, a new building for the WyoTech auto mechanic school, and some warehouses recently. I like working in West Sacramento because it's very progressive and open to development. The city is pro-business.

What do you like best and least about your job?

One of the reasons I think I got into this business is that every new individual project is like getting a new job. It's often in a new area, working with new people and challenges. Construction is so dynamic.

We work in all the Western states, and now we're looking at three projects in Texas. We take jobs in new states with current clients. For instance, if one of my clients wants to do something in say, Kansas, I would go and check out Kansas with them.

What I like least about the job is the stress, the timelines and deadlines and living your life by the schedules. To relax, I spend time with my kids. I ride dirt bikes with my kids. I used to race dirt bikes. Nobody will let me buy a street motorcycle. We also have horses and I like to ride horses with my daughter. I also hunt and fish with my kids.

What advice would you give younger people wanting to get into the construction industry?

I have to do this a lot as a member of the advisory committee for Sac State's construction management school. I speak in a lot of classes, and I tell the students to maintain their ethical standards. Prepare for your standards to be challenged and decide how you're going to handle that.

-- Interview by Anne Gonzales