

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE PEOPLE
WHO BUILD NORTH AMERICA

JANUARY 2010

CONSTRUCTION

TODAY

construction-today.com

GOING UP:
Metrus goes underground
on Le Parc Tower II.

STIMULATING IDEA:
Is the recovery act
accomplishing its goals?

A Solid Service

Block Cos. has stayed strong and reliable
even in the face of the recession.



» Block Cos. owner and CEO Jason Keller (left) is partners in Block Builders with his brother Stephen (right).



» The Kellers stand with Block Construction Operations Manager Jason Norris (second from left) and Block Builders Operations Manager Brian Monk (end). Both firms are divisions of Block Cos.

A Solid Service

BLOCK COS. HAS STAYED STRONG AND RELIABLE EVEN IN THE FACE OF THE RECESSION. BY ALAN DORICH

No matter whether Block Cos.' jobs are small-, large- or medium-sized, the firm always strives to exceed clients' expectations, owner and CEO Jason E. Keller says. "I want to do more than they expect, whether it's a simple thing as being a little early [or] helping with value engineering to keep the project at or under budget," he says. "I want them to come back [to us]."

Keller founded the Baton Rouge, La.-based construction firm after working for two general contractors for 15 years. "At the time, I had five children," he recalls, noting that he always wanted to operate his own company. "I thought if I didn't take the plunge, my opportunity was going to pass me by."

All in the Family

So Keller seized the opportunity and started Block in 2005 with only himself and his wife Joan as his only employee. Since then, Block Cos. has grown to employ a staff of more than 55 and has two divisions: Block Construction LLC, which has a portfolio that includes animal facilities, historic renovations, retail centers, parks, schools and office projects; and Block Builders, which specializes in multifamily apartment buildings and condo conversions.

In addition, the family involvement in Block Cos. has continued. Keller's brother, Stephen, is his partner in Block Builders and its president, and several of their children work in the company. His uncle Artie

Block Cos.

www.blockcompanies.com

- 2008 combined sales: \$278 million
- Headquarters: Baton Rouge, La.
- Employees: 60
- Service: General building and construction management

"We always strive to exceed our clients' expectations."

- Jason E. Keller, owner and CEO

also makes deliveries for the firm. "Everyone [here] calls him 'Unc,' Jason Keller says.

After all these years, Keller has enjoyed his time in the construction industry. "I love it because it changes day to day," he explains. "If I had to do it all over again, I would not change a thing. I absolutely love being a general contractor. I like waking up every morning [and] going to work." He adds that as he has led Block Cos., he has strived to always remain professional.

"Really, we adhere to the old adage; 'honesty is the best policy,'" he adds. "We deliver on what we promise, from workmanship to scheduled completion. That fundamental belief works for us and our clients every time."

For instance, on one school project located in East Baton Rouge Parish, Block Cos. found that the marker and tack boards it needed were not going to arrive in time for the opening. To meet the deadline, Keller hired another supplier so his staff could install them. "When they opened the school, it was ready," he says. "[If] you just treat people the way you want to be treated, I think you're going to prosper."

Bringing Relief and Expansion

Block Builders has just completed two housing projects and begun a third for victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The projects, which are funded through FEMA, involve the construction of 42 individual home sites in Baton Rouge, as well as 34 in Lake Charles, La., which are finished, and 32 townhomes in New Orleans.



"It's not only going to bring back a lot of people who were displaced, but also it's a whole new way of rethinking post-disaster communities," Keller says. The New Orleans homes will be finished in April 2010.

In addition, Block Construction recently completed a new dealership for Peterbilt Motors Co. in Lafayette, La., and two projects for Cajun Industries LLC. The first Cajun project, Keller notes, was an 8,000-square-foot expansion of the home of its deep foundation division. For that \$1.6 million project, "We had to strip and renovate both the interior and exterior of the existing office," he recalls, noting that the company needed to ensure that Cajun never lost power during construction.

Cajun also hired the company to make a \$3.2 million, 12,000-square-foot addition to its main office next door, which has a staff of more than 100. "We had to do it without any interruption to their business," Keller adds. "We finished both jobs on time and on budget."

Valuable Associates

Like many, Block Cos. has felt the challenges of the economic downturn, Keller says.

Previously, "We had been doing more private work than public work," he admits. "[You] always want to keep doing work in both markets though, so you don't ever lose contact with a market."

After the downturn, many contractors turned their attention to publicly funded work, he says. "Instead of having five to eight [competing] bidders on a job, you went to 12 to 18 bidders," Keller says.

To adjust, the company has become more aggressive with its scheduling and the way it has dealt with its forces so that it maintains its strong reputation. "Reputation is everything," Keller asserts. "Even in the hard economic times, you have to produce."

He notes that the company's hard work has paid off. "We're still, in 2009, going to have better numbers as far as growth than we had in '08," he says. "I think 2010 is going to be just as hard, if not harder, than '09."

B&D Companies

We at B&D Companies have been working with Block Construction over the past two years and have enjoyed our partnership with them. Their organization is efficient both in the field and within the office, and they emphasize a close working relationship with their subcontractors. We are proud to partner with them.

Despite the hard work, Keller says he maintains an open, pleasant environment. "I tell my employees, 'If you're not happy, you need to come talk to me,'" he says, noting that the company's turnover rate is very low.

"We've got a lot of great men and women," he says. "They work hard and they value the company because I value them."

Visions of Growth

Keller says he and his brother share a vision of future growth for Block Cos. and its divisions. "We want to grow both companies," he says, noting that many will ask him what his limit is in terms of growth. "I always say, 'I don't have a dollar volume,'" he says. "As long as the people here are happy and my brother and I are happy, and we can take care of our [people] and produce a quality product, then we're going to keep growing and exceeding our clients' expectations." ♦