




The O'Callaghan family builds on history

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When Kevin O'Callaghan describes a Universal Builders Supply Inc. project, he glances upward and draws the structure in midair.

He can visualize the 500,000 commuters that passed under his scaffolding each day for the Grand Central Terminal restoration project.

He knows of the intricacies of erecting 12 operational hoists for a Skidmore, Owings & Merrill Architects design of the AOL Time Warner World Headquarters at Columbus Circle.

The New Rochelle subcontractor has been a behind-the-scenes force for some of the most notable projects in the world.

Now, as winner of The Business Council of Westchester's Family Business Success Award for the 2010 Hall of Fame competition, it is evident that UBS's success lies in the entrepreneurial spirit of the family.

"An extremely strong family work ethic has enabled UBS to endure throughout many tough economic times," said Marsha Gordon, president and CEO of the Business Council of Westchester. "Founded in 1931, UBS has worked on some of the country's most recognizable and treasured structures; one of the most memorable being the Empire State Building, one of the few construction jobs in New York City during the depression. This three-generational company has also worked with the U.S. Parks Department as the principle scaffold contractor on the Statue of Liberty, Jefferson Memorial, Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial."

Universal Builders Supply was founded in New York City by O'Callaghan's grandfather Harold O'Callaghan, a Stevens Institute of Technology mechanical engineering graduate.

"The name Universal Builders Supply is now kind of a misnomer because we're a subcontractor, but back in the day, my grandfather was a supplier of materials," O'Callaghan said. "He used to supply lath to the plaster trade and a lot of concrete-related accessories."

Tony O'Callaghan and Harold O'Callaghan Jr., Harold's sons, took over the business a number of years later.

Tony's sons Craig O'Callaghan and Kevin O'Callaghan followed in the early 1990s; Kevin O'Callaghan became president in 1991.

O'Callaghan said that especially early on in his career, the family business "was a big driving force for living within the reputation for integrity and intelligence that my grandfather started and my father enhanced."

He said the culture is very much the same, although the nature of the work has evolved.

Each generation of Universal Builders Supply had a pet project to be proud of.

"My grandfather probably counted the Empire State Building and Yankee Stadium as his crowning glories and my father and uncle probably looked at the George Washington Bridge and the Statue of Liberty as theirs," O'Callaghan said. "My brothers and I were all involved in some way during those Statue of Liberty years whether it was summer help or whatnot."

Kevin O'Callaghan's own "great engineering feats" were Grand Central Terminal and the AOL Time Warner Center.

A desire to "never stop innovating" keeps Universal moving.

"We have some patents now on what's called a cocoon system with partners in the development community and contracting community, that is a very safety-driven system," he said. "We've been reading about different construction accidents and I think that sometimes construction gets a bad name."

One example is using aluminum to avoid rust, which can occur in steel scaffolding.

Another example can be seen in a 60-story Tishman Construction project on 42nd Street in Manhattan.

"What's exciting about it is that we'll be using the cocoon, so our safety system will be involved," he said. "Our hoisting system is involved. We have an imported, specialty retractable platform that we have developed from Australia that's going to be involved. So a lot of our trade secrets are going to be unveiled in this state-of-the-art, safety-driven building."

Also in the works is a Frank Gehry-designed, 77-story Beekman Tower project in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Though the construction industry as a whole stands waiting for an economic verdict, O'Callaghan knocked on his wooden desk and said "we have been very lucky."

"We probably have a 12-month tail and about an 18-month ramp, so while people were feeling it last year, we were still eating up backlog, which is what we're doing now," he said. As for the industrywide downturn, "We see it looming, but it has not affected us yet. We're hopeful that we can land a few things and go from there."