

FOUR TRADES UNDER ONE ROOF

A Subcontractor's One-Stop Shop of Empowered Employees

by Steve Freeman

Relationships and accountability might not be common terms on the construction jobsite, but Lancaster Burns Construction, Inc. was built on them.

From the company's founding nearly 25 years ago by two high school graduates, then growth into a four-trade shop and transition into an employee-owned business (along with the adoption of "Safety Sam" as a mascot), Lancaster Burns Construction (LB) continues to run on the same personal values forged at its start.

This multi-trade subcontractor offers services of wood and steel framing, drywall installation and concrete foundation

work. Its customers are contractors building retail, warehouse and office buildings, schools and churches as well as multifamily and assisted living structures.

Vance Lancaster, Vice President, and Jordan Burns, President, founded the company fresh out of high school. The two guys needed jobs and saw opportunities in the building trades. Today, the men oversee a 430-person company from their headquarters in Roseville, California.

While any given construction project could have 26 or more subcontracted trades, it is rare for a single subcontractor to specialize in more than one or two. But for LB, broadening its scope to include four trades was less about



The Lancaster Burns Construction team poses in front of a steel truss, a custom fabrication designed to hold up the roof of the William Jessup University in Rocklin, Calif.

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strategic vision and more about common sense.

"It was more of a client-driven development," Burns says. "We'd have contractors ask if we did other work and the answer was 'no,' but we realized there were more opportunities here." So, the owners expanded the company's offerings.

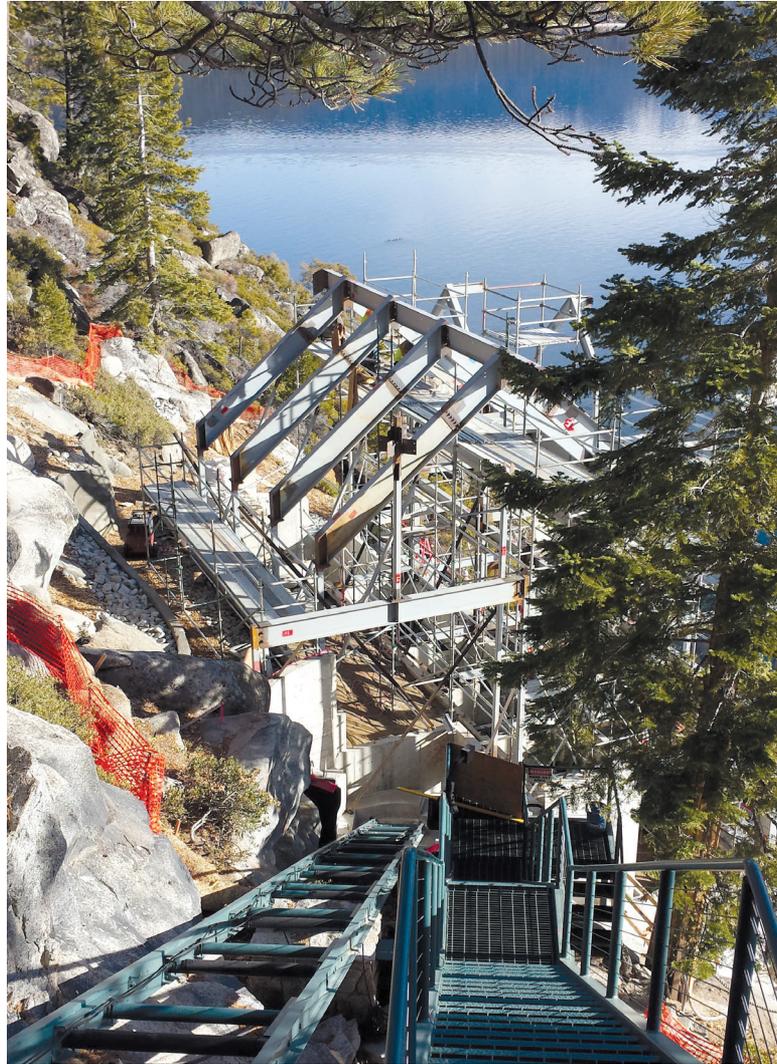
The company's four "structural trades" are foundational to any project. Offering these means LB is automatically qualified to be considered for any project, which provides a resilience to economic uncertainties in the architecture, engineering and construction industry.

Recent projects include metal stud and drywall work for the two-tower, 12-story, 400-unit multifamily Century Towers in San Jose, California. Steel and rough carpentry work occurred at B Street Theatre in Sacramento, California. The company even poured the concrete for Ice Blocks phase three, also in Sacramento, a large retail, residential and office development along the R Street Corridor.

A SPARK FROM THE START

Lancaster and Burns didn't feel so visionary early on. They had known each other in high school in Fair Oaks, California, and soon learned their life directions were similar. Independently, they went to work for a local contractor performing wood framing, renewed their acquaintance, and then things started clicking as a team of two.

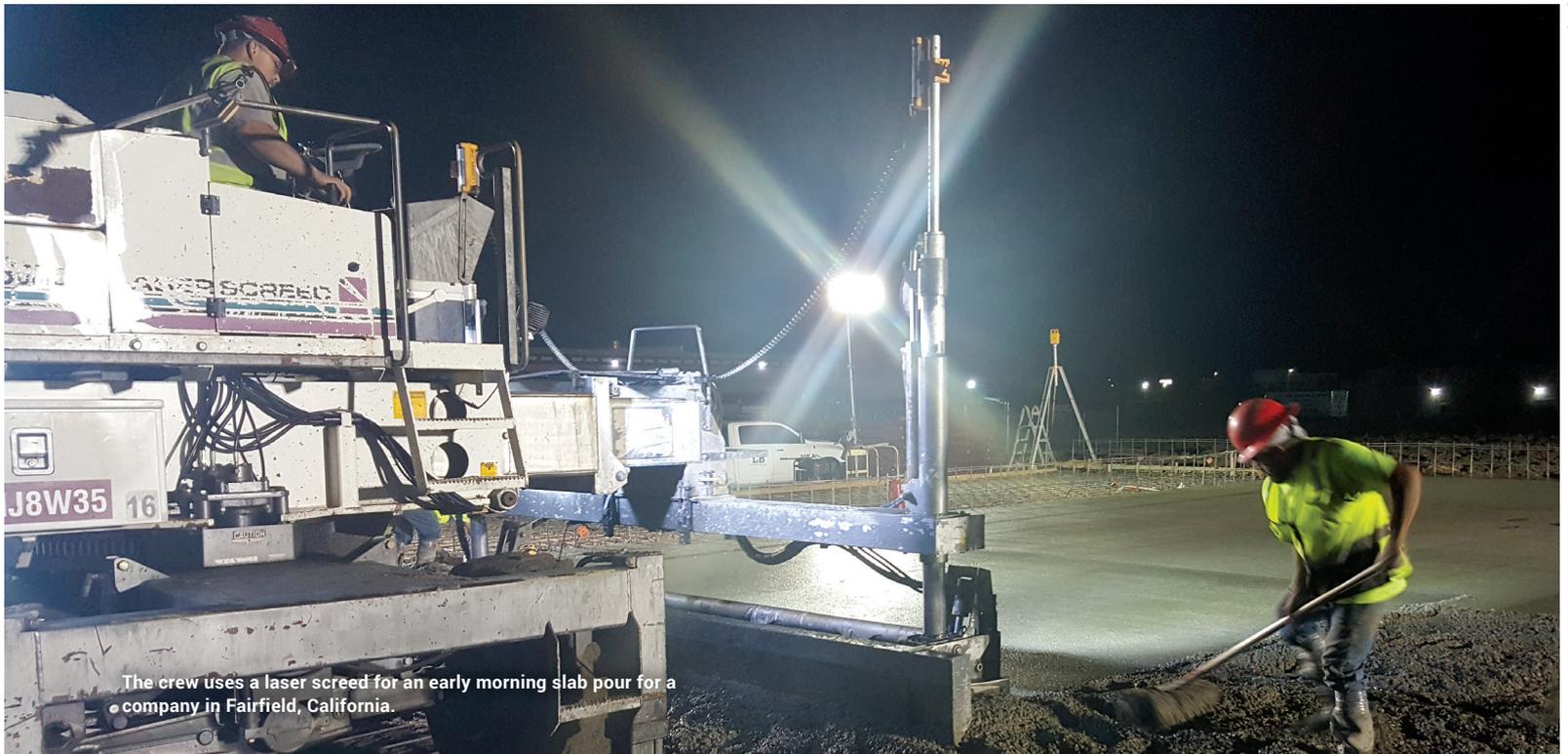
They received their contractor's licenses in 1992 and then took a step



To construct the steel structure for a custom residence on the banks of Lake Tahoe, Lancaster Burns Construction had to transport materials, a crane and the crew by barge every day due to the lack of access on the site.

"We continue to learn how to coordinate the management of four trades. The complexities are high, but we learn as we earn."

**-Jordan Burns, President,
Lancaster Burns Construction, Inc.**



The crew uses a laser screed for an early morning slab pour for a company in Fairfield, California.

that would cement their business ties from there. They bid on and won contracts on two homes in Auburn, California, hiring two other employees to round out the team. It was the humble start of Lancaster Burns Construction.

Their offices were first in Lancaster's home, but then a business address was procured in Rocklin, California. Ambitiously, the duo worked hard to grow the company. Further expansion over the years required a few more office address changes to accommodate a growing fleet of company vehicles and workforce.

While rough carpentry was a focus from day one, the owners were always cognizant of other trades that could be added. In 2004, they started the metal stud and drywall division. Growth from that addition required more space and so the firm built a 16,000-square-foot office in Rocklin.

Successes with two trades led to the addition of a third—structural steel. Lancaster and Burns hired a welder to help get this division off the ground. The company's growing reputation opened up other opportunities in neighboring Oregon and Nevada. Contractor's licenses were added to work in those states.

Next, the company had to accommodate more growth, so its leaders purchased 10 acres in Roseville, which included a 50,000-square-foot facility. Three times larger than the previous space, the new location became the new corporate headquarters. That move also made way for the addition of a

fourth trade, adding a concrete division in 2015. Staying true to its focus on relationships, LB's addition of concrete work was the result of buying out a company whose employees had been together for 15 years—and ready to join the LB team.

"We now have all four structural trades, under one roof, operating as one great team," says Jeff Farley, LB's Business Development and Marketing Manager. "The addition of the concrete division offers us the ability to coordinate even the most complex projects, literally from the ground up."



The metal stud and drywall crew works hard at the eight-story Main & Marshall mixed-use apartments and condominiums project in Redwood City, Calif.



A team meeting involves the rough carpentry crew at the Ice Blocks project in Sacramento, California.

TAKING STOCK IN EMPLOYEE-OWNERS

The company built its success on relationships and proved that again, in 2006, when the owners switched to an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP).

"We'd ask an employee 'What makes you want to continue to work for us?' and he'd say, 'I'd like a piece of the pie,'" Burns says.

There are only about 11,500 ESOP companies in the U.S. and only 4,000 of those are 100 percent employee-owned like LB. ESOP companies typically see increased productivity and information sharing, lower turnover and higher growth. Further exploration shows that going down the path of employee ownership not only favors employees, but is also meant to share liability and taxes and additional capital through tax incentives.

"We realized ESOP would be a growth strategy more than an exit strategy," Burns says of his planning for the future with co-owner Lancaster.

LB strives to be a close-knit family in other ways, too. Besides the usual company outings with families, the company cross-trains its employees by pairing together people who have different trade knowledge.

Another way LB demonstrates care for its employees is through a comprehensive safety program that is guided

by a full-time safety administrator, another rarity for subcontractor companies.

LB promotes a culture of safety so that individuals not only have the ability to come to work the next day, but also because there is a need to minimize accidents since the company is self-insured, Burns says.

Besides frequent safety education presentations and special training for foremen and project managers, LB successfully introduced an in-house creation—a safety mascot called "Safety Sam." The cartoon-like crew member wears a work shirt with the familiar "LB" initials and appears in emails. Each week, job foremen open the emails on their cell phones and discuss the safety tips with their crews at what have become "tailgate meetings."

Burns concludes: "We have stayed in business this long by keeping it simple and doing our best to lead by example. The importance of relationships and accountability are the underlying themes that guide our decisions, and we are doing our best to pass this concept on to the next generation of leaders to ensure the longevity of this company. We continue to learn how to coordinate the management of four trades. The complexities are high, but we learn as we earn." 🐻

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