

NORTH COUNTY

JOURNAL

Print Page

Last modified: Tuesday, July 29, 2008 1:44 PM CDT

Berkeley's Interface Construction marks a milestone

By Brian Flinchpaugh

Sam Hutchinson hasn't forgotten how important the means are to achieving an end when it comes to his general contracting company, Interface Construction Corp.

The means, in this case, are his employees.

"The folks who comprise Interface Construction are its major assets - the reason why the company is competitive," Hutchinson said.

Interface Construction, headquartered in Berkeley, celebrates its 30th anniversary this year.

Few, if any, minority-owned general contracting firms have its longevity in the St. Louis area. Fewer span two generations (Hutchinson's son works for the company).

The 30-year trek is one that has been made possible by lots of people along the way.

"It ain't about the destination - the journey is a lot of fun - and it ain't about the owner," said Hutchinson, 65. He sat in an office packed with mementos like an ornate old stove and pictures of World War II airplanes, antelope hunts in Wyoming and many of his employees.

But the story of what began as "a miscellaneous concrete company" in Wood River, Ill., and grew to a firm with 140 employees and millions of dollars in business annually is also about Hutchinson's story.

As Hutchinson tells it, his story is aligned with the people who helped build the company and guided him along the way.

In 1978, Hutchinson was an industrial engineer at Shell Oil Co. in Wood River. "I came to understand that



David Kennedy photo - Sam Hutchinson owns Interface Construction Corp., headquartered in Berkeley, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. The firm is one of the few minority-owned general contracting firms in the St. Louis.

there was only so far I was ever going to go," Hutchinson said.

An opportunity to form a minority-owned concrete company came Hutchinson's way, and "fear and all," he made the move.

Hutchinson's strength was tracking numbers and keeping a tight control on costs.

"It didn't make any difference what kind of engineer I was, I knew how to solve problems," he said.

And he had to solve more than number problems.

Hutchinson had to work with local unions to staff his company, which was difficult.

"I got a cement mason out of the cement masons union who literally raised me and built the company for the first 10 years," Hutchinson said.

"His name was George W. Cherry, who was a mountain of a man, who was black, who was from East St. Louis, and who could read a set of blueprints upside down and sideways," he said. "He could build you a bust of Abraham Lincoln out of concrete if you wanted it. And he could do it faster than anybody else could do it."

A man who "had hands like baseball gloves," Cherry, who passed away four years ago, made things work. "If he had the same advantages I had, I would have been working for him," Hutchinson said. "On the other hand, we were one hell of a team."

Much of their work was in the West Alton area and included concrete work for bridges and walls along the Mississippi River. They also worked at Scott Air Force Base.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the company continued with its metamorphosis from a concrete company into a general contractor.

There were mentors along the way, including Bryon Ferrell at Helmkamp Construction Co. and Gabriel Alberici of Alberici Corp., as well as friendly bankers and even suppliers who gave him credit.

Then there was Mike McCarthy of McCarthy Construction Co., a major construction firm in the area. McCarthy was looking for a minority business enterprise he could mentor, Hutchinson said. The McCarthy partnership provided training and opened new doors to high-profile government work that needed minority participation.

There also was business on the Missouri side of the river. They made the move about 10 years ago and picked the Berkeley location because of its quick access to area highways.

Hutchinson has taken away some lessons that he imparts to the people who work for him.

"Everybody I have met who has been a mentor has made me understand that there are certain things you can do and you can't do," he said.

"First of all, you can't lie. Second, if you don't do what you say you're going to do, when you say you're going to do it, you've lied to me anyway. Third, you've got to be a teacher and coach."

It's advice that Interface customers say is reflected in their work.

"I trust him," said George Osman, a facilities director at Monsanto. Interface has done a number of projects for the company.

"He delivers. If something goes wrong, he's first on the scene, and he finds a way to fix it," Osman said.

That guidance extends to staff. "I'm amazed that at our pre-project meetings that we're every bit as good as our competition," said Gerald Hutchinson, a son and the second generation working at Interface.

Hutchinson said his father encourages everyone on staff to contribute.

Along with the Monsanto projects, Interface's work includes the distribution center for United Parcel Services on McDonnell Boulevard, the \$14 million annex for the Missouri Veterans Home at Highway 367 at Interstate 270, work on the new federal courthouse in Downtown St. Louis and the pool for the hippo's pond at the Saint Louis Zoo.

The "crown jewel" is the company's work building and renovating laboratories at the Washington University School of Medicine, Hutchinson said.

It's work that requires expertise, he said, because they're building in laboratories where there can be a vibration or noise or changes in humidity, where microbes and dust are prohibited, and where people are working right down the hall.

"We've got to protect millions of dollars of research from any kind of failure through our efforts," Hutchinson said. "And not only that, but we work with researchers who are right up there with God. Everything else we could do is a little less challenging."

Hutchinson notes that there are few if any minority firms here who have met that challenge. He said there still is a mentality that limits minorities in construction from the mainstream.

"History was against us," Hutchinson said. "We were prohibited from joining unions when blacks came north and getting the benefit of training and expertise because unions didn't allow blacks to join. As late as the early to middle 1950s, there were no journeymen who were black who had a chance to go into business on their own."

The lack of opportunity has been devastating to St. Louis, he said.

Hutchinson believes in offering that opportunity to others, like his chief financial officer, who started working for the company when she was 18.

"I said to George Cherry one day, 'George, she makes the same decisions I would do.' He said, 'Well, you raised her, didn't you boss?' I hadn't thought about it like that."