

Constructing Good Will

How contractors are making a difference in their communities by using their unique skills

BY ROBERT RING

It's once again the time of year in which we actively take note of the things for which we are thankful. And often, as we do so, we tend to feel inclined to give something back to those around us. Though many stories are untold, construction business owners and their staff are especially poised to help those in need. In the spirit of this season of Thanksgiving, CBO shares examples of a few contractors who are making a difference.

FIRST RESPONSE TEAM OF AMERICA

If there is a paradigm of the concept of contractors helping others, it is Tad Agoglia, founder of the nonprofit First Response Team of America. Seven years ago, Agoglia, who owned excavation and disaster recovery businesses, felt compelled to begin using his company's equipment to help disaster victims. "As a business owner who owns a



Tim Wolkowicz, Tad Agoglia and Andy Nissley of the First Response Team of America

lot of equipment, my heart was getting tugged," he says. After thinking about ways he might help others, Agoglia noted how most fire departments are equipped only to respond to house fires and car accidents and that most municipalities are prepared primarily for snow and garbage removal and small road repair. He explains, "Neither of those two entities have the resources to deal with a huge disaster." He, however, did.

Agoglia began helping in disaster areas by using his equipment to clear roads for fire trucks and other emergency response vehicles. From there, the breadth of his involvement quickly expanded.

Agoglia's team began renting and purchasing light towers to aid in nighttime operations, technical search-and-rescue gear to locate people trapped beneath rubble, generators to power emergency rooms, and hovercrafts to reach flood victims.

It was not only his experience with heavy equipment that allowed him to help in such effective ways but, equally as important, his instinct as a businessperson. Rather than simply acquire equipment that may be useful in the wake of disaster, Agoglia identified the unserved—and critical—needs that arise in such situations. By doing so, he was able to maximize the ways in which the First Response Team of America could aid disaster victims. "I think one of the



Agoglia receives support from a number of corporations. Here he stands next to his Ram Truck, pumping water from a flood site.

morals of this story," he says, "is that there are different businesses out there, and I had a construction business. I had equipment, and I had people that knew how to run that equipment, and then we found a need that we could help."

Eventually, Agoglia became so involved in this work that he left his business, which had been greatly successful, to run his nonprofit full-time. With the support of companies like Caterpillar, Lowe's, Ram Truck, Cummins and Allmand Brothers, he now works with meteorologists to identify impending natural disasters and mobilizes teams and equipment to offer the help that only someone with his experience can provide.

MCCARTHY BUILDING COMPANIES AND GILBANE

The First Response Team does some amazing work, but you do not have to make a career-changing decision to make a difference. Even Agoglia himself says, "I don't think many people are going to do what I did; it's a little eccentric." All of us have something we can do to contribute to a good cause.

Take McCarthy Building Companies, Inc., for instance. Through a formalized program dubbed "Heart Hats," the company sets aside two days every year for their employees to devote their time to any charity they choose. For the company's San Diego office, the focus is on giving back to the local community.

Bob Getz, senior vice president of McCarthy's San Diego operations, explains, "If we truly want to be considered a community builder, then we have to work with the community and give back to the community." They do this not only by allowing their employees time off to give to a cause but also by hosting charity golf tournaments, donating money to philanthropic organizations and devoting their talents to those with relevant needs. Recently, the company helped renovate the house of a disabled

veteran who runs an outreach for other disabled veterans. For a construction business, of course, such a form of giving falls perfectly in line with the talents they have to offer.

For Paul Choquette Jr., vice chairman of Gilbane Inc., a Rhode-Island based real estate development and construction firm, the philanthropic process is a natural one. As Choquette puts it, "If you're building a hospital, especially a nonprofit hospital, you're going to get very interested in that hospital, and it's natural that you're going to want to contribute."

Like McCarthy, Gilbane not only donates money, but they use their core competencies to maximize the help they can offer through practical methods, such as by repairing the homes of those who cannot afford such repairs. Choquette describes this as a "logical extension" of the company's work. Construction firms have specific skill sets that allow them to help others in ways no other type of organization can.

While there are a number of ways in which charitable giving often comes back to benefit those providing the help, Agoglia, Getz and Choquette agree that any philanthropic effort should be a genuine and selfless one. Indeed, they tend to view philanthropy as not simply the carrying out of generous acts but a duty. Agoglia puts it this way: "I think that this should not just be part of being socially responsible as a business owner, but it should be part of just being human. I don't mean to break it down so simply, but after all my thinking over the years, I've decided that it really just comes down to being a decent human being."

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McCarthy Building Companies' "Heart Hats" crew at Rady's Children's Hospital in San Diego



A McCarthy Building Companies team renovates a disabled veteran's home.

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