

Drennen Delivers

In 1912, Mr. Houston Brice, Sr. came to Birmingham to build the John Hand building; he fell in love with the city and in 1931, he opened Brice Building Company. Today, Brice's CEO, Felix Drennen, oversees a \$300 million construction company with projects throughout the Southeast. In a recent interview, Mr. Drennen opens up on issues from the state of the construction industry to the future of Alabama.

On the state of the construction industry:

The construction market is improved over recent years. Much of the new work is in the Panhandle of Florida; new condominiums, renovations of condominiums and other commercial construction damaged by the hurricane. The unusually high level of demand, however, has put a strain on the workforce. There is a shortage of basic trades needed to do the work, so contractors and subcontractors alike should be very careful in committing their resources, their "people."

On managing in a growth period:

Managing today means being very selective in the jobs we pursue. We must make sure we can perform before we commit. Plus we must ensure our key subcontractors can properly staff the jobs as well; we depend on them just as our owners depend on us. Material price escalation is a current reality. We have to work hard for our clients to secure the best firm price as most construction materials have been increasing in cost with the current high demand.

On Alabama's future:

Alabama is becoming an attractive state for business; companies like Honda and Mercedes prove that point. It's a cliché, but our future hinges on how we educate our children. Alabamians have a strong work ethic; we have to take advantage of that through improved education and training. The burden of paying for better education can't be "assigned" to any one group. It is the responsibility of business, property owners, government and the taxpayers.

On handling failure:

Failure only occurs if you don't learn something from your setbacks. You have to be honest with yourself in analyzing why you didn't get a job, or why something didn't work out the way you'd planned. You have to address the key issues and move on. You can't gloss over the reasons you didn't succeed, but as a leader you can't dwell on the past.

On his favorite new book:

"Franklin & Winston" by Jon Meacham. A fascinating story of the close friendship between the two top leaders of the Allies in WWII.

On changes in construction:

Construction used to be dominated by union labor. In the mid-1980s, work rules became so detrimental to efficiency that the industry moved to a non-union labor force. That, and the rise of the Hispanic workforce have changed the face of the labor we employ.

With the move away from union labor, though, we've had to address training and skill issues. We've had to take on much of that responsibility ourselves and started our own apprenticeship training program. At Brice, we've been blessed to maintain a steady workforce. The nucleus of our management team has been with Brice for their entire careers.

On the keys to success:

In business and in personal life, it's important to be a good listener. The art of listening is just that; it's a skill that must be learned and cultivated.

As I've grown older, I've learned the value of harmony between my work, family and spiritual life. I believe you have to keep them in the proper balance. The ability to forgive is also vitally important. Just as when you make a mistake, how you handle it says more about who you are, what you believe in.

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