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WORLDWIDE
CONNECTIONS
International
Alumni 6

THEY
CAME
THEY
SAW
THEY... 4

GRAD
TIDINGS
10

Build it and they will come

Pictured: Leon Friesen
of Westridge Construction | 18



BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

WESTRIDGE CONSTRUCTION

Leon Friesen knows what it's like to be poor. As one of eight kids, he was working odd jobs and buying some of his own clothes and school supplies by age 11. By age 16 he and his family had moved 12 times, sometimes when the rent fell too far behind.

Still, he considers himself very fortunate. "Early on in my life I found something I thoroughly enjoyed," he says. He received a hammer for his fourth birthday, started building go-carts by the age of 10 and by 1978, had graduated at the top of his class in SIAST's Carpentry program.

Not that he's doing much carpentry today. As president and general manager of Regina-based Westridge Construction Ltd., he's having too much fun running a company that provides general contracting, construction management and design-build services and whose sales exceeded \$63 million in 2012.

Friesen, 58, founded Westridge in 1989 after working at Tricor Construction Ltd. in Regina for 12 years. There, he'd quickly risen to foreman, then project superintendent (while he was still an apprentice carpenter), then project manager. When the owner decided to wind down the company, Friesen seized the opportunity to strike out on his own.

He didn't have a business degree – just a conviction that his entrepreneurial spirit and ingenuity in approaching tough construction challenges would carry him through.

Friesen invited three senior Tricor employees to join him as partners and the start-up firm landed \$2 million worth of work in its first year. It thrived by building schools, offices and other



Leon Friesen, president and general manager of Westridge Construction Ltd. (Carpentry '78)

commercial and institutional spaces. Then the construction market nosedived in the early '90s, and for five consecutive years, says Friesen, "We saw major general contracting firms

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pull out of Saskatchewan. There just wasn't enough work." But Westridge stayed put.

Hard work, long days and steely determination helped carry the company through the economic slump. But its owners also realized Westridge had to become nimble enough to protect itself from the ups and downs of the province's relatively small market. So it diversified, and today the company takes on not only commercial and institutional projects, but also bridge and dam construction and restoration, as well as light industrial projects at sites such as water treatment plants. Friesen likens this approach

"THE MORE CHALLENGING A PROJECT, THE MORE EXCITED I CAN GET ABOUT IT."

to investing in mutual funds, which spreads out an investor's exposure to risk. Although constructing schools can be rewarding, he says, the firm's profit margins would be significantly lower if Westridge restricted itself to such conventional projects. Alternately, focusing solely on high-risk projects with bigger profit margins "would be putting way too much risk in one area for the company."

But high-risk ventures do intrigue him. "Out-of-favour' projects stimulate me," he says. "The more challenging a project, the more excited I can get about it. You have to sit down and really think through how you're going to approach it, how you're going to manage the risk. I'd sooner spend the extra time on that type of project than one that ten other contractors are bidding on." As an example, he points to Westridge's role in increasing Saskatoon's water supply after the company landed a \$31-million contract in 2009 to build the city's new raw water intake and pump station. To enable the construction, Westridge had to construct an earthen cofferdam (a pumped-dry watertight enclosure) – "We had half of the South Saskatchewan River blocked off," says Friesen – and had to wrestle with the challenges of seepage and the river's water level, which can fluctuate by several metres.

Of course, it takes a skilled and unified team to pull off such logistical and building challenges. In addition to 15 full-time office staff Westridge typically has about 90 workers in the field, comprised of a carefully planned mix of carpenters, apprentices and labourers.

Achieving this mix hasn't always been easy. When the Saskatchewan economy starting picking up steam, it became increasingly difficult to find skilled workers. "I think every construction company was scrambling to find enough qualified people," says Friesen. So Westridge poured more energy into recruitment initiatives and apprenticeships and ultimately



Regan Tameling, managing partner, Westridge Homes Ltd.
(Architectural Engineering Technology '92)

Fast Facts

Forward thinkers: Westridge Construction has capitalized on the Saskatchewan economy by diversifying and providing expertise in three key sectors: commercial and institutional building; bridge and dam construction and restoration; and light industrial.

Strong workforce: 15 full-time office staff, with about 90 carpenters, apprentices and labourers in the field. Seven of Westridge's nine owners are SIAST grads.

Smart choice at SIAST: About 95 percent of carpenters at Westridge are SIAST grads.

Top dollars: Westridge Construction's sales in 2012 exceeded \$63 million.

Major projects: Saskatoon Raw Water Intake and Pump Station; Emerald Park RCMP Detachment; Regina Airport Fire Hall Expansion; Douglas Park Elementary School; Arcola Community School; West Regina Highway #1 Overpass; Buffalo Pound Raw Water Pumping Station; Swift Current Joint-Use School; Wintergreene Estates Retirement Residence.

Winning formula: Conventional projects + high-risk ventures = success and satisfaction.

(continued on page 20)

(continued from page 19)

boosted the overall skill level of its field workers. Today, about 95 percent of its carpenters are SIAST grads – and with good reason. A formal apprenticeship through SIAST, says Friesen, arms students with a technical understanding of “why they’re doing what they’re doing and why they should do it this way and not another way.” It’s an advantage that ultimately shows in the quality of their work as employees – and is one of the reasons for the high satisfaction rate among employers who hire SIAST grads.

The company also takes on co-op students, and has hired several grads who proved themselves at Westridge during their work terms in SIAST’s Architectural and Building Technologies and Civil Engineering Technology programs. For Friesen, it’s particularly gratifying to see “the junior people in the company progress and succeed and gain knowledge.”

Above all, he hopes Westridge employees love what they do. He recently read that only 30 percent of employed Canadians like their work. “How sad, to think of going through a career and not really enjoying what you’re doing – it’s got to be horrible,” he says. “I’ve said to many of [our employees]: ‘I want you to enjoy what you’re doing and, if you don’t, find another job. Life’s just too short.’”

Regan Tameling, 43, would agree. The 1992 graduate of SIAST’s Architectural Engineering Technology (now Architectural Building Technologies) program worked as a

Westridge project manager for a couple of years but realized he wasn’t enjoying the commercial side. “It wasn’t me,” he says. “I had to do something where I had more control and could do more design.”

He had always wanted to construct homes, and told Friesen that he thought he could be more profitable for the company by building houses rather than doing commercial work. “I asked for,” Tameling says, “and was given the opportunity to try building a home.”

“I found out where Regan’s real passions were,” Friesen told students and employers in a keynote speech entitled “Living Your Dream” at a SIAST business and industry dinner last year. One custom home led to another and, by 2006, Westridge Construction had spawned Westridge Homes, a builder of higher-end, quality homes. Today, Tameling oversees Westridge Homes’ offices in Saskatoon and Regina and, as managing partner, is a major shareholder in the company – and is living his dream.

It’s a win-win situation that underscores the importance of risk-taking, innovation, self-knowledge and one of Friesen’s firm beliefs: “If you love what you do, you’re most likely going to be very good at it.”

Clearly, he would know.

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