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# CONSTRUCTION<sup>TM</sup>

## NEWS

Reprint

*The Industry's Newspaper*

www.constructionnews.net

Home Ofc: P.O. Box 791290 San Antonio TX 78279 (210) 308-5800 Fax (210) 308-5960 ★ Dallas (469) 549-4643 ★ June 2005 ★ Vol. 3, No. 6

## Quarter-century dawns on Bill Jeter Inc.

Lancaster-based **Bill Jeter Inc.**, a family-owned commercial floor covering company, marks its 25th anniversary this year. The history of the founder's personal journey in specialty subcontracting, however, began in 1955.

"In 1954, my dad, **Frank Jeter**, and his partner, **Bob Millar**, started a commercial floor covering company called **Jeter-Millar**. I went to work for them in 1960. In 1975, Millar decided to retire and they offered to sell me his half of the business," explained **Bill Jeter** in his baritone Texas drawl. "Dad and I were partners for five years – we had a great time and made a lot of money!"

In 1980 the partners divided the company's assets and instigated a corporate spin-off, resulting in Frank's retention of Jeter-Millar and the creation of Bill Jeter Inc.

Bill wore every hat in those first few years – switching from estimating and sales to installations, with the assistance of one loyal helper. As the workload gained momentum, he leased a warehouse and office. In the past 25 years the company, which sells, furnishes and installs commercial resilient tile and sheet vinyl, carpeting, wood flooring and specialty flooring products, has relocated five times.

"I would credit part of this company's initial success to the reputation and recognition I earned through my previous alliance with Jeter-Millar. I've been in the business all my life, so the start-up period was an easy transition for me. In fact, it was almost a vacation – when you go from doing a lot of work everyday to having less work, it's relaxing."

In 1984, Bill's daughter, **Jenny Jeter Gonzales**, joined her father's company on a full-time basis. Under the tutelage of her grandfather and father, Jenny's life-



Jenny Jeter Gonzales and her dad, Bill.

long familiarity and self-confidence with the business was second nature.

"Dad hired me as a truck driver and then he fired me, so that's how I got into sales!" Jenny quipped. "At that time, there were very few women working for general contractors who held estimating or project management positions. In the twenty-plus years that I've been active in the business, the complexion of the industry has changed. In my opinion, regardless of gender, the best project managers are those who have hands-on experience on the construction site."

Jenny finished purchasing the majority of the company's stock from her Dad two years ago. Today, Bill Jeter Inc. has a 6,000 sf facility, a staff of eight fulltime employees and numerous contracted installers. Its sales

people are cross-trained as project managers, and Jenny and Bill divide the management responsibilities. When they welcomed Jenny's stepson, **Doug Gonzales**, into the company in a sales capacity, Bill Jeter Inc. became a three-generation firm.

Asked to describe the most memorable project Bill Jeter Inc. has undertaken, Bill didn't hesitate to respond.

"It wasn't the biggest, but the one we still talk about was the Coca-Cola plant in Moscow, Russia. At the recommendation of the manufacturer, Jenny sold the flooring material to them and had it air freighted. I jokingly mentioned that we'd like to bid the project, and they sent us the plans – which were in Russian.

"I bid the job after they sent us the English version, and we were successful in

being awarded the job," Bill continued. "I flew to Moscow on two occasions and encountered some major obstacles. The project was ongoing during the fall of the Soviet government. Two days before my second trip over there, they started bombing the buildings that housed their seat of government. I did finish up the job but was reluctant to have Jenny accompany me – it was just too dangerous."

Bill and Jenny learned later that the Russian mafia sent rocket mortars into the heart of the plant.

There comes a time when a parent steps aside and hands over the helm to the next generation. Over the next five years Bill plans to phase out of the business, although he said he really enjoys what he does, most of the time.

"I'm kind of an old codger and I freely admit Jenny's much better at interacting with the bankers than I am!" he chuckled. "Without buttering her up too much, Jenny is ready to take over and I have no doubt she can handle the business. I'm very proud of her and she's done a great job!"

"There are very few fathers who have been able to spend as much time with their daughters as I have with Jenny. We have a good relationship and have enjoyed each other," Bill confessed with fatherly pride. "We started off on the proper footing and it's been a great ride!"

Looking back, Bill said he's enjoyed his career in the commercial construction industry.

"I'm fortunate to have worked during an era when deals were sealed with a handshake and a promise was your word of honor. We've both earned the respect of our customers by being honest, fair and reasonable."

—jdl