



Bruce VanWaes

Van & Van Austin

Watching his dad work on improvements around the house, Bruce VanWaes picked up an interest in construction. Though his original plan for life never included reading blueprints or swinging hammers, VanWaes realized, while sitting behind a desk in an air-conditioned office, that if he was going to be happy, he was going to have to get dirty.

Where are you from originally?

I was born in Illinois and grew up in Minnesota. Growing up there was good. It's a great place to raise a family.

What was your first experience in construction?

My dad was always doing home improvements around the house, and I was interested in that. I guess I kind of had a natural ability for it.

Was it what you wanted to do when you grew up?

Actually, I enjoyed writing. I excelled in English and journalism classes, and I figured that I'd end up doing that eventually. Who knows – I still might some day!

In high school, I also took trade classes: drafting, welding, carpentry. It was mostly for self-education. I never really meant to do it as a trade or profession.

Did you work while you were in high school?

I worked for a hardware store, a bicycle retail store – so I was always kind of interested in sports, homes and home improvements. It was the knowledge I had, and I tried to take advantage of it.

Working with my dad, however, I found that I enjoyed working with wood. My construction projects were always wood projects. I felt like I had some kind of talent with it.

What did you do after high school?

I had to find something that I was interested in. I was seeking the type of employment that didn't drive me nuts and that I could still make a living at. I wanted to work with people, so I got into the auto industry.

I started as a car salesman for a car dealership, and I ended up becoming a manager for that business. I figured out through the process that the auto industry was not necessarily completely hon-

est, and I was uncomfortable [with that].

We had hired a construction company to add on to our dealership, and here I am sitting in my office, looking out the window in a suit and tie, at my fancy desk, watching the guys work and I thought, "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay."

I was looking out the window admiring the guys laying the concrete blocks. It seemed more desirable than the business I was involved in. So I went out and got a job working with that company!

When did you move to Austin?

In the winter of 1979. My wife had family living here in Austin, and we came down for weeklong vacation and fell in love with the city.

Our move was a situation where the winters in Minnesota are long and cold, and we came here and got spoiled by the climate.

When we got back from vacation, we quit our jobs and made an effort to move down here right away.

We were young. I was 22, my wife and I had one baby, and another one on the way. It was a now-or-never situation. We decided, "Let's uproot and go while the going is good!"

What happened when you got here?

We settled into an apartment, and the economy was kind of down at that point, so there weren't a lot of jobs around. The first job I did when I got here was as a car salesman.

I applied for the job with the dealership manager. He asked for references and I gave them, but I didn't expect that he'd check them out.

When I had quit the car business in Minnesota, I had a discussion with the owner of the business, and I told him how I felt about the way the business operated: no loyalty to customers or employees. I told him that I couldn't believe that he'd allowed the corruption to go on. I was pretty sure that I'd burned that bridge for good.

It turned out that he gave me the most glowing review they'd ever heard. I was shocked! I guess that my previous employer felt that I was honest with him and he appreciated it. So I got the job working with the dealership and I worked half a day.

You only worked half a day?

Well, I realized that it was Christmas time, and I needed a paycheck by Friday. It looked like with the dealership it would take 30 to 45 days to start seeing commissions.

So I went to lunch and stopped at a construction site on the way home from lunch. I asked them if they needed laborers or anything, and they let me come to work.

I went and changed out of my suit, put on some jeans and work boots and went to work that afternoon for a framing company!

I spent my days learning. They were

a great group of guys and were very helpful. They were anxious to help a new guy learning. It was fun! I enjoyed the camaraderie of being with the crew and being outdoors every day.

Working in the hot sun, in the rain, in the cold, in the mud – it was a great experience for me.

How long did you work for the construction company?

I did that for about six months, and then started my own framing company in 1980.

I went to one of the project superintendents and told him that I was going to be starting my own framing crew, and asked if he would allow us to do one frame job for them to see how we did.

He gave us a break. We gathered up some tools, hired some helpers, did the frame job and it worked. At that time, the company was so short of framing contractors that they let us take as many houses as we wanted. I think we did about 150 houses that first year for them.

What type of work does your company do?

We do just about anything connected with construction. I like to say if it requires a hammer or a tape measure, we've been involved with it at some point in time.

We started out as a framing company, and then we picked up remodeling, room additions and home improvement projects. Then someone asked us to build a house for them, and we ended up becoming homebuilders as well.

So now we do commercial and residential remodeling, framing, home building and commercial building.

How were your first few years of business?

My first few years were exciting and terrifying all at the same time...trying to come up with the money for payroll every Friday – man!

I think I had 125 employees at one time. We were building houses, framing hotels. I had 15 different condominium projects on 15th Street – I thought that was a unique situation!

I'd spend all day driving around just going from job to job. Times were good, but then it became a different situation. Later in the '80s, the rug got pulled out from a lot of companies, and a lot of businesses went down. We had to go out to a job site one day and lay off a lot of people.

I think we got down to just me and one other person, then it was six to eight months later until something came up where we could hire an extra hand and start building back up again.

How did you find the people you worked with?

Well, I started with a brother-in-law, and his last name was Van der Hagen. That's how we came up with Van & Van.

We hired a couple of people – just asked around to see if anyone wanted to work construction. We found some good



Bruce VanWaes says one of his favorite things about working in construction is driving away from a project that is complete and looks good. He says that's a hard feeling to beat!

guys that were in the same situation as us – just wanting to work construction.

We all worked together. It was fun. We worked hard, and we worked long hours. It was a great learning experience, and it was a great life experience.

My ex-brother-in-law worked with me for about six months, and then went off to do other things, and I stuck with the business.

Are there any points in your business' history that stand out?

I entered a house in the '85 Parade of Homes, and it was one of the first to sell on the block. It turned out to be a blessing that it sold right away because within weeks after the Parade of Homes the economy started sliding.

Were you ever nervous about owning your own company?

I never doubted myself. I was more nervous about working for other people and whether they could keep me employed. I always felt like if I were in charge and things didn't go well, I didn't have anyone to blame but myself.

How is your business different from when you first started it?

Well, it's run by a better guy, and I think he knows a lot more about it than he did back in the beginning!

Business evolves with the environment that it performs in, and the way Austin has changed is the way the business has changed. It has become a better place to live, and our business has become a better place to work and work with.

Next year Van & Van will turn 30 – how does it feel?

Wow! Time flies when you are having fun! One of the neat things about construction is that you can start as a laborer and end up owning your own business.

It's fun to build things and at the end of the day look back and say, "Wow – a lot happened today!" I take pride in what gets done in a day, and take pride in what we are going to do tomorrow. –va



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