

Risking It All

Risks, Reinvention Drive a Century of Success Behind E.E. Austin & Son, Inc.

The Business Magazine's "Risking It All" section highlights the entrepreneurs who made sacrifices to build their businesses in our region. This month, we sat down with Clemont Austin, president of E.E. Austin & Son, Inc., with offices in Erie, Pennsylvania, and Falconer, New York, to talk about the rewards of owning your own business — and the risks you take to keep your company relevant.

For more than 100 years, E.E. Austin & Son, Inc. has been providing quality construction services to northwest Pennsylvania and the southern tier of New York.

And for 37 of those years, Cle Austin, great grandson of founder Edward Everett Austin, has been at the helm of the general contracting company — one of the region's oldest and largest.

Today, E.E. Austin & Son — which began as one of the nation's first 100 ready-mix concrete plants and is responsible for the construction of Erie-area landmarks such as Veteran's Memorial Stadium, Erie International Airport and the formerly named Louis J. Tullio Arena — offers general construction and construction management for institutional, industrial and commercial clients, as well as a concrete division that manufactures and delivers ready-mixed concrete.

It's also operated by the same values of personal integrity, technical competence and consistent quality on which it was built.

But it hasn't always been easy.

When Cle took over the business in 1976, the firm's clients were mostly public entities, which meant little work, and cash was hard to come by.

"We had no capital, no equipment, no customers," Austin explains. "We were an old company with old-fashioned ways."

To stay relevant meant taking risks — one of which was reaching out beyond the typical Austin customer and participating in the construction of regional medical centers, manufacturing facilities, hotels and casinos, and large-scale office buildings. As a result, the business became a force in the regional construction industry — and a name for quality among its peers.

It also meant that they didn't always have the best or newest equipment, buying used trucks to reserve capital.

"We used to say we bought the worst half of the truck, the second half of its life," says Austin. "But because of those decisions, we're now able to enjoy the best half — the first half of its life."

Success has been gratifying, and allowed both Austin and the company to give back to the community with donations of both money and time. Yet it wouldn't have been possible without the hard work of loyal employees who have kept the business at the top of the construction and concrete game for more than a century.

"In the construction business, you have to be able to pick and choose who you work with and how you do it," says Austin. "Fortunately for us, the people we've been able to hire and train are among the best, brightest and hardest working people out there."

For those looking to go into business for themselves, Austin offers a small bit of advice.

"Build your customers and your staff one at a time," he offers. "Start small, conserve your cash, and don't overextend yourself when it comes to purchasing hard assets.

"There's a lot of flexibility in owning your own business if you do it well."

For more information about E.E. Austin & Son, Inc., visit www.eeaustin.com.



Cle Austin is the president of E.E. Austin & Son and Austin ServAll Concrete.



Among some of E.E. Austin & Son's most recent projects are the REDC at Penn State Erie, the Behrend Campus (now known as the Burke Center), the Lake Erie Biofuels plant, and Johnson Reservoir.



Erie County presented the 2012 Excel Award to E.E. Austin & Son in October.

