Dirk Schafer Takes the Helm as 2017 Chairman of The Builders’ Association

Plans to Focus on Sales, Marketing, and Proactive Evolution of Services

Dirk Schafer, our 2017 Chairman, joined The Builders’ Association Board in 2013. He became an Officer in 2015. He is the fifth individual from JE Dunn Construction Company to serve as chairman of the Association. John Ernest Dunn, Sr., who in 1924 founded the company that bears his name, was chairman of the Association in 1942. He was followed by his son William H. Dunn, Sr. in 1988, Weldon L. Fate in 1997, and Thomas F. Whittaker in 2007.

Dirk received a B.S. degree in Construction Engineering from Iowa State University in 1980 and an MBA in Finance from the University of Missouri–Kansas City in 1984. He is a Registered Engineer.

During his career with JE Dunn, Dirk has been in charge of some of the company’s largest projects, including the National Security Campus, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. He has been involved in many more projects totaling over 21 million square feet, including tenant finish, hotel, office, parking garage, retail, warehouse, manufacturing, education, religious, correctional facilities, and data centers.

As Midwest Region President of JE Dunn since 2012, Dirk oversees offices in Kansas City, Springfield, Des Moines, Omaha, Minneapolis and, since early 2013, Williston, North Dakota. The Midwest Region had approximately $1.65 billion in revenue in 2016.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

“JE Dunn’s vision and purpose is ‘to enrich lives through inspired people and places,’” said Dirk. “Giving back to the community defines the way our company operates. In the words of Bill Dunn, Sr., ‘Personal fulfillment and satisfaction in life comes from what you give back, not what you get out of it.’”

Dirk currently serves on the Board of the Kansas City Metropolitan Crime Commission. The Crime Commission’s mission in our community, he believes, is “exemplified by the SAFE Program (Surviving Spouse and Family Endowment Fund), which provides financial assistance to families of public safety officers who lose their lives in the performance of their duties.”

He also serves on The University of Kansas Advancement Board, an advisory group which represents the objectives of The University of Kansas Medical Center, The University of Kansas School of Medicine, and The University of Kansas Physicians.

Dirk is involved in the American Heart Association’s Heart Walk, Treads & Threads gala benefiting the Cancer Center at The University of Kansas Hospital, and the Heart of America United Way. He is also a former member of the Iowa State University Industry Advisory Council.

FOCUS AS CHAIRMAN

As Chairman of The Builders’ Association, Dirk says that he would like to place a special focus on marketing and sales. “As an Association, we have to find a way to reach more people. We really have to articulate the value proposition of our services to every potential member.

“In the past, many companies sought membership in the Association not only for its services, but for the status it conferred. Members now expect the Association to demonstrate the value of membership services on an ongoing basis. Now more than ever, industry leaders and the Builders’ staff need to be proactive in evolving our services and the way they are delivered.

“A specific assignment coming out of the Builders’ board retreat this past November was to increase the focus on our cost accounting,” he continued. “Tony Drees [The Builders’ Association Controller] does a great job providing cost accounting information, and once you’ve determined the costs associated with the delivery of a particular service, you can perform a meaningful cost-benefit analysis.”

IOWA ROOTS

Dirk traced his journey from Algona, the small town in Northern Iowa where he grew up, to JE Dunn. “My father was the great American success story. He started out as a delivery boy at an auto parts store and ended up owning the business,” he recalled. Dirk’s mother worked for a farm credit agency.

During the summertime, Dirk worked in the auto parts business with his father. When he turned 16, his dad encouraged him to find a summer job of his own. “Growing up in Algona, the two best paying jobs were detasseling seed corn and walking the bean fields. I had allergies which prevented my doing either, so I took a job that was easy to find and paid the best, which was in construction. My dad was a real handy man and he had exposed me to projects such as building a garage, remodeling a basement, and odd jobs around the house.

“My parents taught me the fundamental values of hard work, honesty, and being considerate of others,” continued Dirk. “It was also really important to them that I go to college. I was the first person on my father’s side of the family to go to college, and I remember my parents saying, ‘We don’t care what you study or what you choose to do, just...”

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be the best you can be.’ “ Taking their advice, Dirk sought out a nationally-recognized engineering program and found it in his own backyard at Iowa State University in Ames, less than two hours south of his hometown.

During the summers after his junior and senior years in high school, Dirk worked for a Butler building franchisee in Algona. “We dug, formed and poured the footings; formed, poured and finished the slab-on-grade; and erected the pre-engineered steel building. I remember putting the roof metal down in the summer heat and using the patented Butler seamer to seam the roof panels together.”

Dirk’s path took a minor detour when, upon graduating from high school, he pursued a sales opportunity he learned about from a friend. “I sold Bibles door-to-door in Texas for a couple of weeks. Coffee table Bibles, children’s versions, large print versions, you name it. It was a multi-level marketing scheme. If you succeeded, you went out and tried to recruit people and build a team under you. I learned a familiar lesson firsthand: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. I didn’t do worth a damn, so I came back and worked for the Butler builder I’d worked for the previous two summers.”

After his freshman and sophomore years of college, Dirk worked for a home builder. “We poured the concrete and did all the wood framing. We also installed the windows, siding, shingle roof, and sheetrock.”

Following his junior year, he served an internship with Ringland-Johnson-Crowley, a commercial building contractor in Des Moines. “They eventually became Taylor Ball and then Taylor Kelly in this market, and are now Kelly Construction Group,” commented Dirk. “So Scott Kelly and I actually had the same first boss, Jack Taylor.” Scott Kelly, 2015 Chairman of The Builders’ Association, is President of Kelly Construction Group, Inc.

Dirk explained how he was drawn to Construction Engineering. “I was a science and math nerd in high school, and engineering seemed logical. I visited Iowa State and found out they had a construction engineering program. But for one D in a calculus class I never wavered,” he smiled.

**PERFECT TIMING**

“I remember coming down to Kansas City with several job offers in hand and I had to give people answers the following week. I thought, ‘I’ve never been able to get in the door at JE Dunn and I think I’ll make one final run at it.’ So I called their office and spoke with Mr. Dunn’s assistant, who said, ‘Your timing couldn’t be better because the board of directors met yesterday, and they decided to hire one college graduate this year. Unfortunately,’ she added, ‘Mr. Dunn’s not here.’” (Mr. Dunn was William H. Dunn, Sr., JE Dunn’s Chairman.)

“I explained to her my situation with the offers that were expiring the following week and she said, ‘Terry Dunn and Fred Shipman are here. Maybe they can talk to you.’” (Terry, who is William, Sr.’s son, was Vice President and Treasurer at the time. Fred Shipman was Senior Vice President.)

“An hour later she called back and asked if I could be there at 1:30, so I came over and met with them. I had a lot of summer work experience under my belt and pretty decent grades, and I felt the meeting went really well, so I said, ‘I’d really like to work here,’ and they replied, ‘Well, Mr. Dunn’s not here, so we’re not able to offer you a job.’

“So we talked a little longer and at some point I asked them to tell me about comp and benefits. They told me the starting salary would be $18,000, and I said, ‘I’ll take it’, and they said, ‘No, you can’t take it because Mr. Dunn’s not here.’”

The story had a happy ending, of course. “The following week, Mr. Dunn called me at my apartment in Ames and we talked, and at the end of the call he offered me a job,” said Dirk.

**WORDS OF WISDOM**

Early in Dirk’s career, JE Dunn was building the offices for Mutual Benefit Life. The 11-story building opened in 1984 at 2323 Grand. “The job had a deep excavation. We had a hard time coming out of the hole and were behind schedule. It was a concrete frame building and we had a pour at about the third floor where the seven-day cylinder breaks were really low. [The compression strength of concrete is measured by breaking cylindrical concrete specimens in a compression-testing machine.] It was during the winter, and the superintendent had set out the test cylinders for the lab and that probably froze the cylinders. He recommended we wait for the 28-day breaks to see if the concrete was of the proper strength and durability.

“So we were waiting for the 28-day breaks, and back then the typewritten lab report came via U.S. mail. As a young project manager you’re typically very busy, and sometimes there are more things to get done in a single day than you have time to do, so you didn’t always get to your inbox until the end of the day. As I recall, it was about 5:30 p.m. when I got to my inbox. The results of the 28-day breaks were there and they were even lower than the seven-day breaks, so we clearly had a problem with the slab. By then we already had formwork sitting on top of it, and may even have poured the floor above it. I was looking at the test results when Mr. Dunn walked by.

“He knew immediately that something was wrong. He asked me what was going on and I
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told him. He was very complimentary like always, but he said two things: ‘No. 1, this is a problem-solving business, and if you don’t have the temperament to consistently solve problems, then you ought to think about being in a different business.’ The second thing he said was, ‘I don’t judge people by their problems but by how they respond to the problems that are put in front of them.’ I’ll never forget that.”

As it turned out, the project team was able to resolve the issue and complete the project on time and on budget, added Dirk.

Dirk worked for JE Dunn from 1980-90, when they were headquartered at 929 Holmes. (The 64-year-old building was demolished in 2013.) He was a senior project manager when he left for Walsh Construction in Chicago, where he reported to the company’s president.

“When we were awarded the Sprint Campus project, Terry Dunn moved the operating group out to the jobsite in Overland Park,” recalled Dirk. “It was at that time, in 1997, that Terry asked me to return to JE Dunn. I’m really proud to be part of a leadership team that has been with the company through significant growth,” he continued. “When I was hired in 1980, we were very much a local, maybe regional contractor. To have gone from where we were in the early ‘80s to where we are today has been an incredible privilege and opportunity.”

Dirk is now in his thirtieth year with JE Dunn. He moved with the company to 901 Charlotte (now the Police Headquarters Annex) in 2000 and to their current headquarters at 1001 Locust Street in 2010.

THE RIGHT BALANCE

Dirk is very close to his two daughters, Kate (26) and Carey (22). Kate graduated from The University of Tulsa with a business degree before joining Cerner Corporation as an event coordinator.

Before they went off to college, Kate and Carey were encouraged by their father to strive for balance at school. “I described it as a three-legged stool,” he said. “No. 1, it’s really important that you apply yourself, because college requires a significant investment in time and financial resources. No. 2, if your college years aren’t the foremost fun years of your life, you’ve missed a great opportunity. No. 3, when you go to college you’re dependent upon your parents, but you need to prepare to be independent by the time you graduate.”

He added, “If you’re valedictorian and don’t have any fun, I would say your college years weren’t as successful as they could have been. Conversely, you can have all the fun in the world but not get a good education.

“Kate spent a semester studying abroad in Florence,” continued Dirk. “She grew and matured during that time and it really opened her up to another part of the world. Carey, having seen how her sister was affected by the experience, wanted to spend time abroad too. Carey learned that one of the best environmental science schools in the world is at The University of Melbourne in Australia, and she grew immensely while she was there.”

Carey is now a senior at Tulane, where she is majoring in Earth & Environmental Sciences.

“I remember Kate saying after several years at Cerner, ‘You know dad, I don’t want to wake up 10 years from now with a family of my own never having worked anywhere outside of Kansas City.’ I encouraged her to really pursue that dream right away, while she was still on my healthcare insurance, so she moved to the Big Island of Hawaii where she’s working at a health and wellness retreat.”

One of Dirk’s fondest memories is of time spent with his daughters traveling to all fifty states, beginning with Colorado and ending with Alaska. “We had been perennial Colorado summer vacationers and I decided there’s got to be more to see. We traveled over the Fourth of July and watched the fireworks together wherever we happened to be,” he recalled. The fireworks displays over Elliott Bay in Seattle, San Francisco Bay, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and Boston Harbor were among the most memorable, he said.

He has taken his own advice by seeking balance in his life and career. “My three-legged stool is my family, my friends, and my job. Fortunately, I am very blessed in all three areas.” He has also found exercise and humor to be key ingredients to maintaining this balance.

Dirk has long been a dedicated walker. “I have walked religiously 25 days a month, good weather and bad, for the past nine years. I record each walk in my Outlook calendar and number it to make sure I get in all 25 days.” He typically walks in the evening and averages about 60 miles per month.

He also had a hand in choosing business humorist Greg Schwegm as guest speaker at the 130th Anniversary Banquet on February 24, explaining, “At the time Don and Kristy and I talked about it, we were really wrapped up in the election. [Don Greenwell is President of The Builders’ Association and Kristy Peto is Corporate Secretary & Events Coordinator.] While business had improved in our industry, things were so uncertain with the election, and the cycle had gone on for so long, that we agreed that having a speaker who might bring some levity to the event would be a great idea.”

AN EYE FOR INTEGRITY

“JE Dunn is a values-based organization,” noted Dirk. “We publish our values and live by them. Our values define both who we are and how we conduct business. We also subscribe every day to Mr. Dunn’s golden rule of treating others the way you would expect to be treated.”

Dirk explained how he determines if someone is a person of integrity. “I think the first thing is sitting down face-to-face, having a conversation, and seeing if that person looks you in the eye. We work with people around the country in different kinds of partnerships. We would never recommend that the company partner with someone without first meeting with them face-to-face. I think you can just tell from conversing with someone if they are sincere, if they are someone of substance.”

He described himself as a “hands-off” manager, stating, “You need to empower people and let them do their jobs. You always have to lead by example – you shouldn’t ask anyone to do anything that you yourself either haven’t done or wouldn’t be willing to do. As a leader, it’s really important to know that trust and respect are not an entitlement. Having a certain position or title doesn’t really entitle you to anything. Trust and respect have to be earned every day, and even if you’ve worked years to establish both, you can lose them in a minute.”

Dirk said his focus on business staff development at JE Dunn has primarily been in the project management ranks. “It is where I came into the organization and where I worked my way up through the organization. We’ve worked really hard to create the right support group for our project managers and superintendents. The integrated project services group includes safety, quality, scheduling, and estimating professionals, as well as in-house mechanical and electrical staff.”

How would someone who has known him for a long period of time describe him? “How about, how would I hope someone would describe me?” he laughed. “I hope they would say honest, sincere, even-handed, and a problem-solving engineer, which may have a good or bad connotation depending on your perspective.”

How does he gauge when an individual is ready to operate with little oversight from him? “You have to develop what I call an intuitive working relationship, which you develop based on the questions people ask you and the answers you receive to your questions. I think I was paid a great compliment when one of my direct reports said, ‘Dirk’s very hands off. He empowers us, lets us do our own thing, but he’s always there when we need help.’”

PAYING TRIBUTE

Dirk paid tribute to Greg Dunn, Vice President of Dun-Par Engineered Form Company and his predecessor as Chairman of The Builders’ Association. “As a board member, and especially this past year as chair, Greg has been a great mentor. He is soft-spoken, but when he has something to say it is always worth listening to. He is also humble and very intelligent.” He added, “I feel much more comfortable serving as chairman knowing that Greg will remain at my side during this next year.”

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