

J-Squared Away

Started With Faculty Housing at Pepperdine, Developing Government Niche

By KATE SCHWARTZ

Santa Ana-based **J-Squared General Contractors Inc.** started in owner **Jeff Clark**'s North Tustin home in 2013 after a falling-out with his previous employer.

Clark set out to build a "different kind of construction company."

Hard to argue with what Clark has done with J-Squared, which has grown 1,050% since then and now employs a total of more than 40 people at offices in Orange County, Los Angeles, and Arizona.

The fast pace put the company at the top spot on the Business Journal's list of fastest-growing private companies in the small-companies category, defined as \$9.9 million or less in annual revenue for the 12 months ended June 30 (see Special Report, starting on page 21; small-companies list, starting on page 52).

It's not Clark's first entrepreneurial achievement.

He started an auto detailing shop right out of high school. The company grew to about 22 employees when Clark sold it at the age of 19 to get into the construction business.

He discovered his passion for being on the job site—even when work stretched into the night—after a short stint as an office-based project manager.

"I very quickly realized that it wasn't who I am," Clark said of the office duties. "I enjoyed the camaradery that working hard and late at a project created."

He worked at two large construction companies in Irvine, **Snyder Langston and Suffolk Construction Co.**, as well as a small company in Garden Grove—Clark declines to name the company to this day, calling it a "bad split."

Hatch

He started J-Squared in 2013, with a contract to build faculty housing at Pepperdine University's campus in Malibu providing an early base. J-Squared had \$350,000 in revenue that year, prompting Clark to focus on the company full time in 2014.

He partnered early on with a colleague, **Dennis Hatch**, who now is the owner of Santa Ana-based **J-CM Services**.

The two companies work in tandem to provide construction and construction management services to large developers. The companies are separate entities but have branded themselves together as the **J-Affiliated Cos.**

"Dennis is a huge reason why this company has been as successful as it is," Clark said. "Dennis is an extreme talent. I've



Clark: "I'm a field guy at heart"

learned that if you have dedicated and talented people working with you, that's where the success will come from."

The companies have expanded their project portfolio many times over in the past two years. Notable clients include Scottsdale-based **P.F. Chang's China Bistro** and **U-Haul International Inc.** in Phoenix.

J-Squared reached \$3.5 million in 2014, and it's on track for about \$9 million this year, according to Clark.

The company also is developing a specialty in federal-government-funded projects, including a radar tower in Boron and ballistic barrier wall construction at the Federal Aviation Administration's offices in Lawndale.

"This is nowhere near what I had envisioned when we first started," Clark said. "This was maybe my five- or six-year plan, and got there a lot faster."

'Scramble Mode'

Clark said the rapid growth has brought some growing pains.

"I'm not going to lie, we have been in scramble mode lately," he said. "We just hired four more superintendents and are interviewing project coordinators and managers, as well. We have had to turn down a few projects recently, but I have strong people over here, and we are all rolling with the punches right now. If we all keep working hard, we are going to be just fine."

Clark also said he is hesitant to let J-Squared get too big. He takes pride in

knowing his employees and having the capacity to communicate with each one personally.

"A few weeks ago, when I went to walk a construction site of a custom home we're doing in Studio City, it dawned on me how big we are getting," said Clark. "I walked onto the site, and three different people asked me who I was. It wasn't a good feeling, because I've been down that road where employees just feel like a number at a large company."

Employees

Clark recalls his time in the field at the big construction companies and said he vows to make sure his employees are treated differently.

"I'm a field guy at heart, and without my guys [J-Squared] is nothing," he said. "If they aren't treated well and don't want to work late nights in the field to get a job done, then I don't have a company. Everyone here is family, and I don't want to grow to the point where that stops."

Clark said he is embracing the growth, even if he is doing so hesitantly.

J-Squared recently moved into bigger office space in Santa Ana off McFadden Avenue and is in the bidding process of a several large federal government contracts.

"I've always been an entrepreneur at heart," Clark said. "We are all really excited about how well things are going over here. It's not slowing down anytime soon." ■

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