

FOCUS

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Real Estate & Development Grinder Haizlip Aims for Steady Growth



FIELD WORK: Chris McDermott, left, reviews architectural plans for a Grinder Haizlip Construction project alongside co-worker Keith Coker. --
Photograph courtesy of Grinder Haizlip Construction

ANDY MEEK | *The Daily News*

For the two men who run Grinder Haizlip Construction Co. Inc., the job of building their company's future is done brick by brick, one employee at a time.

The low-key construction business has been around since 1992, and co-owners Greg Grinder and Henry Haizlip - perhaps now more than ever - are thinking big. Not just in the size of their business, but also in the imagination with which they and their next generation of project managers tackle new jobs.

Building business. Most of the company's work comes from repeat clients. The staff rarely bids on new projects with a crowd of other contractors, but the company still enjoys a bonanza of building projects. Those include a new 50,000-square-foot Homer Skelton Ford dealership going up in Olive Branch and the renovation of a Midtown building for the New Ballet Ensemble.

Some of the company's success owes to relatively new hires, such as Chris McDermott.

"Give me 10 more like him, and I'll be unstoppable," Haizlip said of McDermott, who formerly worked for Black & Veatch - a global engineering, consulting and construction company - and was later an owner's rep with FedEx. "He has the educational background that we look for, and he's had the corporate structure added to that. Then he comes to a smaller company with an entrepreneurial spirit, and the marriage of all that is exactly what we look for.

"With the capabilities of each new hire, it just expands our horizons greatly. They're able to manage new workloads, they're self-starters, and it enables us to do more of what we do competently."

Small, but steady. The fact that Grinder Haizlip's operation looked promising enough to lure McDermott away from FedEx says something about the way the company does business.

Comparisons to his former employers couldn't be more lopsided: Black & Veatch employs about 10,000, and FedEx has grown into a \$29 billion network of companies.

Grinder Haizlip, by contrast, has a total employment of about 100. The company serves the commercial, industrial and manufacturing sectors of Memphis, North Mississippi, West Memphis and Jackson, Tenn.

One of the things McDermott likes most about his current job is the opportunity to get out of the office and into the field.

"A lot of people have asked me, 'Why would you leave FedEx?'" he said. "And I guess it was that I loved working there, but it was almost too comfortable. It's a totally different deal here, but it comes down to being able to work with architects and owners and others.

"And I told these guys if I could learn how to do integral calculus, I could probably learn how to do retail centers, medical offices, car dealerships and warehouses, which is what we do a lot of."

Right away, he said, his fit within the company was snug as a dovetail joint.

"It's just a neat little deal here, and I'm blessed to have the opportunity to have them appreciate what I can do," McDermott said. "It's interesting, because Greg is more on the engineering side, and Henry is more on the architectural side. They can finish each other's sentences, which I've seen an endless amount of times, but their world only intersects maybe 5 percent.

"Greg's got his thing, Henry's got his thing, and every project manager here works for both of them."

Recruiting new standouts. Haizlip said the company scours the field for highly trained, well-rounded recruits, especially those who might have shuffled between jobs in several cities and are ready to settle down.

"There are basically three ways that contractors do it," he said. "They hire an aspiring young college graduate, train them, put them in the field, bring them in the office and bring them up the ladder. Or, you're born into it and it's something your family has done.

"There's also a tremendous pool of guys who come out of engineering school or construction technology and management school, and they typically are hired by large national or international firms. They're used as assistant project managers and kind of the work force in the office, if you will. And they get tired of moving every two years across the country or being uprooted and moved to the latest job. So we watch for that constantly, if we can catch one of those guys. That's what we're looking for."

Slow growth. Grinder and Haizlip snagged McDermott from FedEx after running into him on a job in which he was helping renovate the old IRS building on Democrat Road. His future employer was the contractor on that project.

"It was 528,000 square feet of a mess," McDermott said of the building. "I inherited the project in the early stages, and as we dealt with each other going through it and after it was completed, Greg and Henry called me up. They asked if I'd be interested in coming over and working on the construction side of things."

That's a pattern Haizlip hopes to repeat again and again.

"We want to expand, and we're just watching our business grow tremendously right now," he said.

Grinder Haizlip Construction Co. Inc.

Owners: Greg Grinder and Henry Haizlip

Founded: 1992

Basics: The Memphis-based full-service construction company serves commercial, industrial and manufacturing clients throughout the Memphis region.