



## Spotlight

### Bob Betancourt

#### Zenith Construction

**B**ob Betancourt was born in 1954 in New York City. He grew up on the north end of Manhattan Island in Washington Heights, near the George Washington Bridge. While he was in his early teens, the family moved to a small town in New Jersey, just across the river.

His father, Oswald, who emigrated from Puerto Rico, worked as an appliance repairman. Rachel, his mother, is a first generation American whose parents emigrated from Italy, and she worked as a bookkeeper. Betancourt's parents still reside in the house he grew up in, and they continue to work well into their 70s.

#### Do you have any siblings? What do they do?

I have two younger brothers and a younger sister. Thomas and Brian are both attorneys still living in New Jersey, and my sister, Andrea, lives in Denver and is vice president of a local credit union.

#### Where did you go to high school?

I went to Northern Valley Regional High School located in Old Tappan, NJ.

#### What did you do after that?

I wasn't thinking about going to college after high school so I moved to Florida with a friend and started working in the construction industry. I was a helper for a masonry contractor out of Miami. After a short time I was involved in a serious car accident and could not work. So to pass the time, I enrolled in the local community college to study architecture. After two semesters, I knew architecture wasn't for me so I changed my major to engineering.

#### So you knew that you'd major in something construction-related?

Absolutely. I always liked the industry. I liked being outdoors and building new things.

#### What brought you to Houston?

Well, after completing my first year of college, I moved back to New Jersey to convalesce and continued with my education. The economy in the Northeast still wasn't great, and I kept reading about Houston in the newspapers and how great its economy was, so I moved here in 1976.

I immediately hired on with a masonry contractor. I then met a carpentry contractor and we ended up becoming partners framing apartment complexes. Throughout all this, I continued my education at night.

#### Where did you finish college?

I graduated from the University of Houston in 1982 with a construction management, civil engineering technology degree.

#### After you graduated, what did you do?

I was a subcontractor to a general

contractor and worked mostly in multi-family construction, but I wanted some exposure to the commercial side of the industry. With degree fresh in hand, I pursued employment with a commercial general contracting firm and went to work as a superintendent for Mission Construction.

You may recall that at the tail end of the '80s the economy in Houston was not looking very good, but the Northeast, particularly the New England area, was booming. I took a job with a contractor out of Massachusetts as a project manager, and basically commuted back and forth from Houston for about two years. My wife, a Texan, really didn't want to move up there, so I came back to Houston, and worked with various general contractors. I also enrolled in U of H's MBA program and received my degree in 1992.

After working 10 years with Mesa Southwest Construction as vice president of special projects, I ventured out and formed Zenith Construction in 2001.

#### Did you always want to eventually start your own business?

Yes, I have always had an entrepreneurial spirit. Ever since I was a little kid, I was always working or doing something to earn income. I used to shine shoes on the corner in New York City for a quarter. A quarter went a long way back when I was 8 years old.

#### Did you like growing up on the East Coast?

The East Coast is a beautiful part of the country. Upstate New York and New England have a lot to offer, if you like fishing, camping and hiking. The city is also a great place to go for the diversity, theater and dining.

#### Did you have a mentor in business?

My father-in-law helps me a lot in the operation and financial planning aspect of the business.

On the construction side, there have been a lot of people along the way – from owners and architects to my peers in the industry – who have shown me solid, ethical and moral ways of doing business and still operate a profitable business.

Jim Langley, my first boss after college, really had a positive effect on my construction ethics. I think that is why we have been so successful. Our mission statement clearly defines how we are to treat our clients.

#### Can you describe Zenith?

Zenith Construction is a small professional general contracting firm. Over our five years in business, we have defined our niche by providing construction services for projects up to a million-and-a-half-dollar range. Most of our work is in the worship, institutional and commercial sectors of the industry. We currently have two diocesan projects, four projects at Rice University, one project at the University of St. Thomas and one commercial build-out in progress.

Last year 90 percent of our completed work was negotiated. We are very unique in the fact that although we are only five years old, most of the staff has worked together for over 15 years. There is a lot of common ground and understanding on focusing on the client needs. Jack, Paul and Sharon – three of my key employees – came on board when the company was formed.



#### What do you find rewarding about your job?

I really enjoy meeting with the clients, doing the presentations and helping the clients meet their budgets.

#### What do you most admire about your wife?

Other than being a great wife and mother, Barbara is a very focused person. In the early years of our marriage, I was working out of state while Barbara stayed in Houston. We had our first child in 1984 so Barbara had to take care of Kathryn while pursuing a career.

She located the house we currently live in based on school districts and student-teacher ratios. She is an attentive person not only in her family life but her business life as well.

Barbara is the director of commercial surety for Suretec, and she has been in upper management in the surety industry for quite a while now. I admire how she conducts her business, and the way she conducts herself: she's a very professional woman. Barbara is also a great person to bounce ideas off of; I can't tell you how many times she has helped in my decision-making process.

#### Tell me about your children.

I have three wonderful daughters, Kathryn, Maggie and Angie. Kathryn is 22 and will be graduating from Texas Tech in May with a degree in business. Maggie is 16 and attends Memorial High School, and Angie, who is 14 years old, will be a freshman at Memorial High School in the next school year.

#### What have you learned from them?

Patience, tolerance and how to enjoy the little things in life. When they were young and participated in sports, I really enjoyed watching my girls play and mature in their chosen sport.

#### What do you consider your greatest accomplishment to date?

That I have a great and balanced life. I think from a business perspective reaching our fifth successful year has been a great accomplishment. Having three great kids and a strong marriage for 25 years is also quite an accomplishment on the personal side. Watching my first daughter graduate from college in May is going to be great, too.

#### What is your favorite thing to do when you are not working?

I have a couple of hobbies. I like to fish, which is probably the one thing I do the

most, but not as often as I'd like. I have a very good childhood friend from New York, and we get away once a year and fish in various places around the country. I recently took up fly fishing, which is a blast. I also like to ski as well, and I usually get to do that once a year.

I also collect things. Reading is one of my passions, and I love Stephen King and collect his limited and first edition books. So I like to go into used bookstores or garage sales and see what is available. It is fun to find something that you don't already have. I also collect Lionel toy trains. I have quite a collection of the New Jersey Central line and every Christmas boxcar since their inception in 1984.

#### How do you unwind after a long day?

After work I unwind at the neighborhood YMCA. On Mondays and Wednesdays, I attend an evening military boot camp-type training class, and on Tuesday and Thursdays, I go to spinning class. The spinning came in handy when I participated in MS150 ride from Houston to Austin for the past two years.

Physical activity after a day in the office helps me release the stress of the day before I go home.

#### Do you enjoy traveling?

Yes, I love to travel. We plan an annual spring break trip with the kids. This year we went to Costa Rica, and I fell in love with the country. My wife and I also take mini vacations in the summer, just the two of us. We will take a few long four-day weekends and go somewhere out of town. Thus far, we've been to Mississippi, New York, Las Vegas and Chicago. It's important for us to get away by ourselves.

Two years ago I took an interesting trip with some high school buddies. Because we all were turning 50 that year, the 12 of us went to England for a week. It wasn't what you would consider a typical week of culture and history, but we sure did see a lot of pubs.

#### What has been the biggest lesson you've learned so far in this business?

Nurture and maintain relationships and always keep the lines of communication open. As I previously mentioned, 90 percent of our business is negotiated so fostering trust and integrity with clients as well as subs is key to running a successful business.

It's also a good idea to hire and associate yourself with quality people to work with you along the way. – *akj*

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