



THE RIGHT PLACE, THE RIGHT TIME: Since starting his own construction company in May 2005, Jason Keller has seen revenue reach the millions since his Towne Center retail projects.

MAIRE CONSTANTIN

CONSTRUCTION

Block buster

Company makes a name for itself with Towne Center projects.

BY TIMOTHY BOONE

If you're looking for a company that epitomizes what's happened to Baton Rouge since Hurricane Katrina caused the area to rapidly grow, Block Construction might be exhibit A.

Jason Keller started the construction company in May 2005 after years of working for local contractors such as Lane Grigsby and Guy Hopkins. Things started off slow. Keller's first office was a trailer set up on a construction site. "I have five children and a wife," Keller says laughing. "I was looking for any kind of work. I would have built a dog house to put food on the table."

As work started to pick up, Katrina hit, causing thousands of people to move into Baton Rouge. Many of the people who moved were retailers looking to establish locations outside of New Orleans in order to diversify their customer base. The Towne Center at Cedar Lodge has become a haven for these retailers, and Block has become their builder. To date, Keller has helped to build 18 stores in the center and has four more under construction. The work has involved finishing out bare space, such as installing the walls, flooring, shelves and electrical systems so a business can start attracting customers.

Keller has had a bit of help in getting his foot in the door at Towne Center. His brother Stephen's company, Creekstone, is the developer for the open-air shopping center at the corner of Jefferson Highway and Corpo-

rate Boulevard. But family ties will only get a business so far. "Steve definitely helped introduce me to people, but I had to follow through with quality," Keller says. "They either selected me and we negotiated a price, or we put in for a bid and were the lowest bidder. If the work wasn't there, they wouldn't select me. It doesn't matter who the developer is, businesses want the most bang for their buck."

Cristy McNabb, who co-owns the Style Lab for Men store in Towne Center, says she selected Block because the company had a good bid and Keller had the best information. "His rapport, his personality, we figured we could easily mesh through such a big job," McNabb says. "He put us at ease."

After eight weeks of construction, Style Lab for Men opened in early July. "They definitely delivered the store for us," McNabb says. "It's beautiful, and we're very pleased with the work."

Keller was born in Baton Rouge and graduated from Catholic High. He then headed to Northeast Louisiana University (now University of Louisiana-Monroe) and earned a degree in construction management. He worked for Blount Construction in Montgomery, Ala., for a year, then headed back to Baton Rouge and spent five years with Cajun Constructors and nine years with Guy Hopkins Construction.

Opening his own business was Keller's goal for a while. When he graduated college in 1990, he wrote out his career goals on a sheet of paper. One of the goals was to open a business.

"The timing had to be right," Keller says. "When I got started, I had enough experience from working with other contractors. I had learned a lot in the field and in the office, so I was ready to throw my hat into the ring."

With the help of all the Towne Center customers, business has taken off for Block. The company posted \$1.3 million in revenue during 2005 and is set to do about \$3.8 million this year. So far, Block is on track to do between \$8 million to \$10 million in 2007.

"We were in the right place at the right time," he says. "When I started, I had a business plan for the goals I wanted to reach in the first year, the third year and the fifth year. In fiscal 2007, we should hit our fifth year goal."

Block has grown from a small trailer at Towne Center to taking up office space off College Drive. The company now has 17 employees.

About 75% of Block's business comes from commercial/retail clients, but the company is branching out. They've done some work at LSU, including putting up metal buildings, renovating classrooms and making improvements in student housing.

Block is wrapping up one of its biggest jobs—construction of a 28,500-square-foot shopping center in Prairieville near the Wal-Mart Supercenter. That center is set to open in January and is the first job Block built from the ground up.

Keller is also getting ready to begin work on an office complex in Gonzales at the corner of Burnside Avenue and Worthey Road. The \$5 million project will consist of seven buildings and will be similar to the professional offices that line Bluebonnet Boulevard, from Jefferson Highway to Interstate 10. "That's going to be the first office complex of its kind out there," Keller says. "They're going to have insurance companies, CPAs, attorneys, brokers out there."

Building retail spaces and office parks is something that Keller says he wants to keep doing.

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JASON KELLER, founder, Block Construction

Baton Rouge and keep local people working here," he says. "I like the idea of driving around and being able to tell my children or their children that I built this and it's part of the community."

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