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D.A.G. Construction: How accountant from India built an American dream to pass along to his kids

'You want money, you've got to work for it'

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CINCINNATI – Transitioning a family business to a second generation can be tricky, especially in a competitive industry such as construction.

"When it's done right, it's literally heaven on earth," said Steve Hater, membership director of the Goering Center for Family & Private Business at the University of Cincinnati (<http://business.uc.edu/centers/goering.html>). "When it's done wrong, it's a train wreck waiting to happen."

Dale White never had any doubt that his three children would step up to run D.A.G. Construction Co. (<http://www.dag-cons.com>), the business he and Greg Webb started in 1990. (The D.A.G. stands for Dale and Greg.)

"At a very young age, the kids did show some kind of interest in the business," White said of his son and two daughters. "They would say I pushed them into it. I don't feel I pushed them. They fell in love with it."

White's older daughter, Stephanie Hall, 37, is now president of D.A.G. His son, Dale White,

A painting of Dale White, left, and Greg Webb.

Jr., 35, is vice president and manages the company's hospitality division. His younger daughter, Lindsay Wilhelm, 32, is vice president of marketing and business development.

Webb remains a partner in the business and oversees the company's education market. White, 67, is CEO of the company, and his wife, Jacqueline, 65, handles accounting.

A native of India and an accountant by training, White learned the industry while working for Cargile Construction for 15 years. Hall is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati's construction management program. She and her brother both have worked for other large construction companies, too.

D.A.G. has a total of 50 employees – 36 of them full-time – and revenue that averages about \$15 million a year. The company has worked on such high profile projects as Paul Brown Stadium, Horseshoe Casino Cincinnati (<https://www.caesars.com/horseshoe-cincinnati>) and the massive Cincinnati Public Schools renovation project. These days, D.A.G. is also doing a lot of work for The Kroger Co (<https://www.kroger.com>).

WCPO talked with the Whites and their two daughters about D.A.G.'s longevity and how the transition to the next generation is going. (Dale White Jr. was busy on a construction project.) Excerpts from the interview follow:

WCPO: Dale, did you ever think D.A.G. would have this kind of staying power?

Dale White: The kids did show some kind of interest in the business. They wanted money, and I said, 'You want money, you've got to work for it.'

Lindsay Wilhelm: I think we fell in love with the passion that he had for what he did every day. None of us wanted to see that legacy end. Long after we get him to retire, it will be something that we get to hold onto as the hard work they built, the American dream that they built.

Dale White

Q: Has it been difficult to access money to grow the business? That's a challenge I hear from a lot of small business owners, particularly minority business owners.

DW: Having an accounting background, I was able to manage that with our personal savings and my connections with the bank. I didn't grow fast overnight. I grew strategically so I was able to balance the needs and the wants of the company.

LW: They say the second generation is the thunder. We don't want to be the thunder. We want to have a strategic growth pattern, too. Sometimes we had to do without so they could make sure the business could stay open. It's really made our strategic plan client-focused and not project-focused.

Q: The first big D.A.G. project I remember is the company's work as part of the construction management team for Paul Brown Stadium. What did that project mean

DW: That work started in 1997. It meant a lot of exposure and learning how the big companies attacked the project. It gave us a great amount of experience to see how all the facets worked. We gained a great knowledge teaming up with Turner and Barton Malow. We learned from them how they did it, and that was some kind of experience that I'll never forget.

LW: It also opened the door to changing us
from a general contractor to a construction

Lindsay Wilhelm

manager. We wouldn't have had \$1.2 billion worth of work for Cincinnati Public Schools without that Paul Brown Stadium experience.

Q: Was it difficult to sustain the momentum after that high profile Paul Brown Stadium job?

DW: Yes, it was difficult. Some of our good people were stolen by the other companies. That was a challenge we constantly faced.

Q: The company has weathered economic downturns several times. You've talked about the importance of projections and good accounting practices. What have been other important factors for getting through the tough times?

DW: We told our staff, 'Look, the economy is changing. We need to survive. I don't plan on closing. We want you to help us. Find us cost-saving measures.' Most of our employees have stayed and have worn many hats.

LW: Everybody just picked up where they needed to pick up.

Q: What does this next generation of leadership bring to D.A.G.?

Stephanie Hall: Youth. My sister and brother are very tech-savvy, very knowledgeable. I'm a little more old school. They have processes and abilities that can speed up what we tend to do a little bit slower to make our working a little more efficient and faster.

Stephanie Hall

LW: We have three engines versus one. My mom did all the accounting work, but he was the engine. We all have the same passion, and now three engines can sustain what one did for 25 years. I

DW: I feel blessed. They say that when you have children in the business, there's always going to be somebody not agreeing. In our company, I have three children who have three different types of expertise, and each lean on each other to make a team.

Jacqueline White: We talk to many people who own their own companies, and they tell us their children are not interested. And I feel very sad. I'm glad it's not happening to us.

Q: What made all of you want to continue in the family business?

Jacqueline White

SH: Dad said, 'You're doing this.' When we were younger, Dad said, 'You can be whatever you want.' Then for Christmas, I was 10 or 11, and he got me a construction set. I wanted to do the design side. I went to college and enrolled in architecture. And he was right. I got bored sitting behind a computer. I think it was his helpful nudge that did it for me. My brother, he's always been hands-on. I think that was always in his blood.

LW: I wanted to save the world through nonprofit marketing. I realized that wasn't going to pay the bills. He had a stent put in in 2004, and the realization that he's not going to be permanent, the realization that the business he built could die if we didn't all come together, I couldn't let that happen.

Dale White Jr.

SH: That's his legacy he's leaving us.

JW: We've been able to take vacations and everything once they came on board.

SH: But we have a set office that will always be Dad's office. If he ever does die, we'll take him to a taxidermist and have him stuffed so we can keep him in there.

Q: Where would you like to see the company be in five years?

LW: We have a strategic plan to grow approximately \$2 million a year by focusing on education, health care and hospitality.

SH: We do plan to grow the company, not to a size that's unmanageable for us. Our greatest achievement is that we are a small, family-owned business, and we treat everyone as family. If one of our employees' daughters is graduating, we get invited to the graduation party. I want us to grow a little bit more so we can stay competitive, but we don't want to lose that.

LW: All three of us also recognize the importance of that work-life balance. Our niche is as an awesome diversity partner. We have no desire to lose our home lives and work all the time like they did.

Q: Then it will go to the next generation after you?

SH: No. The plan is to eventually make the company employee-owned. My son's going to be the first doctor/lawyer in space.

LW: But if you ask our kids what they want to be, they all say construction.

Q: What are the next big opportunities and hurdles for the company?

LW: I think the hurdle will be continuing to work with all our employees to let them know there is no glass ceiling here. Let them know there will be positions to advance.

SH: The other hurdle is, when Dad was doing the business, he was the face of the company. Everyone in the industry knows Dale White Sr. It's going to take time to introduce the three of us to this construction industry that only knows Dad. A lot of the industry is older. Looking a little younger, being women in the industry and trying to earn their trust in partnering with us – that's probably one of the major hurdles we'll have.

LW: The health care market is a huge opportunity for us. We have two certified health care constructors on staff. There are only 18 in Ohio. It's in our niche of what we can handle. We feel we're going to be very competitive.

D.A.G. Construction's offices in Winton Place.

Lucy May writes about the people, places and issues that define our region – to celebrate what makes the Tri-State great and also shine a spotlight on issues we need to address. She has been writing about women- and minority-owned businesses in Greater Cincinnati for more than 17 years. To read more stories by Lucy, go to www.wcpo.com/may (<http://www.wcpo.com/may>). To reach her, email lucy.may@wcpo.com (<mailto:lucy.may@wcpo.com>). Follow her on Twitter @LucyMayCincy.

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