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Never Say No

BY: MARK GORDON | MANAGING EDITOR



Maurice Opstal founded Stellar Development in 2007 after working for DooleyMack in Sarasota for 11 years. Stellar has several ongoing hotel renovation projects in and outside of Florida.

Maurice Opstal says one key to beating the recession, at least for a startup construction firm, is never to turn down a job. Water heaters in Alaska, anyone?

A burly college football player, especially a lumbering defensive lineman, isn't normally thought of as nimble.

But for Maurice Opstal, a Gulf Coast construction executive who was a walk-on lineman at Auburn University in the early 1990s, being nimble is a necessity. It's the primary reason he has been able to grow a startup construction firm during a stifling recession that has mauled the industry along the Gulf Coast.

In fact, Opstal's firm, Lakewood Ranch-based Stellar Development, reached \$2 million in revenues in 2008, 400% growth over its first year in 2007. The company has six employees and its current projects include a 100,000-square-foot church in Clearwater and hotel renovations in Tampa and Charlotte, N.C.

"We are taking gradual steps," says Opstal, who projects the firm will reach \$5 million in revenues in 2009. "We are growing at a good pace."

Opstal had previously worked for Sarasota-based DooleyMack, one of the region's most respected and well-known builders.

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Doc knows what's up — wants Senate seat

Dr. Julio Gonzalez, a Venice orthopaedic surgeon and a relatively unknown Republican in political circles, has officially applied for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Orlando.

He rose to become a company vice president over his 11 years there, with a focus on hotel projects. But in 2007, Opstal finally decided to heed his inner entrepreneur and go his own way.

At first, Opstal's former colleagues and associates said he was crazy. At the time, Opstal's wife, Vanessa, was six months pregnant with twins who would be the couple's third and fourth children. Leaving DooleyMack meant he could say goodbye to his health benefits, for starters.

But now he's getting calls of congratulations. Opstal's firm is quietly becoming a player in local construction circles. The company recently beat out more established Zirkelbach Construction for a job with the Manatee School of the Arts, and it has also outbid other firms for work, including Kraft and even DooleyMack.

Opstal's strategy isn't only to be nimble, it's also adverse to saying no.

"I don't treat any projects as too small or waste of time," he says. As a result, he jokes — sort of — that he would change a water heater in Alaska if one of his top clients, such as Gainesville, Ga.-based McKibbin Hotel Group Inc., asked him.

Opstal's strategy and approach with Stellar is also aided by his financial backing from SMG Property Management, a Lakewood Ranch-based apartment complex firm. The firm gave Opstal a cushion in the early days, both in terms of providing financial support and assistance for Opstal's nervous psyche. Says Opstal: "I wanted the financial stability to take away some of my fright."

Opstal actually founded Stellar in 1999, soon after he earned his general contractor's license and three years after graduating from Auburn. The idea was to keep Stellar his backup plan while learning with an established firm such as DooleyMack.

It was a costly plan B: Opstal paid about \$3,500 a year in taxes and fees just to keep Stellar an active entity.

The move also followed a pattern of preparation Opstal had been fine-tuning since he was a teenager growing up in the projects in Miami, the son of a general contractor. Back then, Opstal played quarterback for his high school football team and was recruited to play for a few local colleges.

He ultimately ended up at Auburn, where he played on the defensive line until a shoulder injury ended his career.

Opstal's family also holds an entrepreneurial edge. He and his wife jointly own Box Furniture, a Sarasota-based furniture design and distribution business that targets hotels in the Caribbean and Mexico. And Vanessa Opstal also owns Simply Spoiled, a beauty products boutique in downtown Sarasota.

And, if none of those business opportunities works out, there's always modeling or singing. Opstal was selected as one of Sarasota's seven hottest husbands by Sarasota Magazine last year, an award that included this nugget:

Opstal sings Hannah Montana songs to his daughters before bedtime.

Review Archives

Maurice Opstal is the latest of at least three Sarasota-area construction executives who have left the comforts of working for a large firm to go their own way.

Mike Scherette left a regional manager position and gave up a potential ownership stake with W.G. Mills in 2005 to start his own firm, Power Contracting. And Jeff Charlotte left his job running the Sarasota office of St. Petersburg-based Hennessy Construction in 2007 to start his own company, J.E. Charlotte Construction Corp.

Both Charlotte and Scherette's firms are still around today, battling through the recession.

Charlotte, the 2009 chairman of the Gulf Coast Builders Exchange's board, says the first half of the year for his firm was awful. But over the past few weeks he has picked up three contracts for commercial work in Sarasota and Manatee counties and he expects to break even for the entire year. Scherette says his company has several pending projects that have been temporarily suspended due to the economy.

For more on Scherette and Charlotte's decision to go solo go to <http://www.Review.net> and search: Mike Scherette.

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