



A new drawing board

John Smillie

Roloson aims for small-firm mentality as president of LaBella

By KEVIN OKLOBZIJA

There was something about the concept of drawing lines on paper to create some sort of structure—a barn, a warehouse, a house, whatever—that Jeff Roloson always found compelling.

Then again, while growing up in the Seneca County village of Waterloo, he couldn't really avoid the process. His father, Raymond, owned a construction firm. Brewer Road General Contractors built dairy barns, storage barns, light commercial buildings and homes.

"My father would swing a hammer all day and then on nights and weekends he would do the books," Roloson said.

The kitchen table often became the place to examine the blueprints.

"I was very much attracted to the art of building, seeing the plans rolled out on the kitchen table," he said. "I would find myself kind of critiquing the plans. I always had that bug of designing."

The only bug that had a stronger allure at the time was horsepower. As much as Roloson enjoyed drawing, he liked driving a lot more. Motocross, snowmobiles, muscle cars—you name it, if it had handlebars or a steering wheel, he was revving the motor.

But it wasn't just piloting the vehicle. He also was intrigued by the idea of making everything on a car perfect, so much so that he was sure auto repair would become his vocation. His first project was his first car, a green 1969 Dodge Coronet that needed some serious tender loving care.

"After I bought it, I disassembled it and then put it back together with a lot of sheet metal and bonds," he said. "I took off the fenders, the doors, the whole car. My brother and I turned my

parents' garage into a parts bay."

Most impressive: When he put that Dodge back together, there were no leftover parts. Talk about great preparation for a career.

Except when friends asked him to help find a remedy for their car problems, he learned something even more important: "I realized I didn't like to work on someone else's car," he said.

Thus, it was back to the drawing board. Literally. Architecture became his pursuit, and for that he can be very thankful. Over the past 15 years, Roloson has climbed the ranks at LaBella Associates, from project architect in 2005, to head of the architecture division in 2010, to president at the start of 2020.

And, at 49, he's still snowmobiling and participating in motocross.

"I need to take out more insurance," joked Sergio Esteban, LaBella's board chairman.

Roloson's promotion was part of a well-planned, multifaceted leadership transition that took effect on Jan. 1. Steve Metzger replaced Esteban as CEO, Roloson took over from Robert Healy as president, and Mike Winderl slid into Metzger's spot as chief operating officer. Esteban and Healy (the treasurer) are still very much involved as principals of the firm, but the reins for daily operation were handed over.

"The company is always forward-looking as far as generational succession," Esteban said. "I said to Jeff the other day, 'I want you to know, you're doing things I don't think I could do. You're better than me.'"

Which is, of course, very much the point when leadership changes hands, Esteban said.

"If you replace me with me," he reasoned, "then you'll just get what you've had."

As president, Roloson keeps tabs on all services that LaBella provides, from market intel to hiring and recruiting, as well as establishing corporate strategies and direction for the firm's eight divisions (architecture, buildings engineering, civil engineering, transportation, environmental, waste and recycling, power systems and program management).

"We're looking for opportunities that

we can grow in each of our services," Roloson said. "But we also keep an eye on recruiting and retention. We want to provide the best place possible for people to practice their profession."

They're succeeding in that mission, even as they've grown to around 850 employees across nine states plus Spain. LaBella was one of just three architecture and engineering firms in New York to earn Great Place to Work certification for 2019-20, a recognition based on employee surveys.

"That's important to us because if a person is happy and proud of the company they work for, then the client can tell that and know that," Roloson said.

Maintaining that culture as the company grows even larger isn't necessarily easy, however. That's why management remains focused on employee contentment and advancement, without losing the in-office sense of extended family.

"We strive to keep that small-firm mentality in place," Roloson said. "We're more than 850 employees, we're 850 families."

Indeed, leadership isn't just about steering the ship, it's showing empathy, it's getting to know employees, it's making sure everyone understands what role they play in the equation of overall success.

"He has a great sense of business for consulting, for architecture, for engineering, and sometimes that's not easy to grasp," Esteban said. "But he also cares about people, which is very important in a business like ours where all we have is people; internally with our employees and externally with our clients."

Those external relationships extend to the competition as well. Even as LaBella has grown — around 450 employees are in Rochester — the firm knows it's certainly not the only show in town. It's not unusual for LaBella professionals to join forces with a division from a competing firm to help a client complete a project.

"Sometimes we say, 'If we team together, it's a better team,'" Roloson said. "We can be competitive on one project and teammates on another. That's what's great about this community."

So, too, is the resolve and resiliency, which has come to the forefront during the coronavirus pandemic. While the definition of the workplace changed and reliance on video conferencing and collaborative software became imperative, there wasn't too much interruption in workload for LaBella's professionals.

"I was extremely worried we would lose that connectivity with clients," Roloson said. "But only a handful of projects were postponed, and we've actually added some new projects."

Times of crisis also are when leadership becomes even more important.

"You need to make sure people are getting clear direction on what needs to be done and by when, and then be following up on that," Roloson said. "Our quality can't lapse."

Roloson is well-schooled on what LaBella is about. He joined the firm in 2005 as a project architect. His first duties involved design of the Finger Lakes Performing Arts Center (now the Constellation Brands Marvin Sands Performing Arts Center).

When you've drawn the plans and the project is then completed, an architect always has something to be proud of, because the work is there for everyone to partake in.

"To me, that's the ultimate satisfaction and reward, to see end users enjoy the space," Roloson said. "There's a lot of fun in drawing and design. You wrestle with schedules and product and budgets and when you finally work through all of that, people come in and you get to see the sense of awe."

In his new position, he's no longer drawing. Gratification is derived from seeing LaBella teams attain success.

"It's such a collaborative process to bring a project to life," Roloson said. "There's a great deal of satisfaction in empowering other people to practice their craft and attain their goals."

While he's no longer designing buildings for clients, he hasn't thrown away the graphite pencil. At least not at his home office.

"I find myself sketching a lot at home," he said. "Sometimes it's thinking about if I ever wanted to build a home. Sometimes it's just a landscape sketch."

But always it's about what he's forever loved to do.

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Jeff Roloson

Title: President at LaBella Associates

Residence: Le Roy

Age: 49

Education: Associates degree in architecture from Alfred State College; bachelor's degree in architecture from the University at Buffalo.

Family: Wife, Julie; daughter, Sydney, 20; sons Matthew, 17, Thomas, 12

Hobbies: Motocross, snowmobiling

Quote: "There's a great deal of satisfaction in empowering other people to practice their craft and attain their goals."