



Posted on Thu, May. 12, 2011

Two-man architecture firm grows to one of city's largest

BY JOE STUMPE
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Ken Helmer and John Howard had short-term goals like paying the rent when they founded the architecture firm bearing their name 30 years ago.

And even that wasn't a given with zero clients.

"We probably only looked ahead two weeks at a time," Helmer said.

Today, the firm has grown from a two-man operation with a borrowed desk to 22 employees and two locations. That's down from a pre-recession high of 42 employees, but Howard and Helmer still ranks among the half-dozen largest architecture firms in Wichita.

Helmer recalled that the firm's first job was renovating restrooms for Wichita's Eastside Financial Center. Soon, the pair landed work for Pizza Hut and Residence Inn franchises.

"One day we're redesigning bathrooms just to stay busy and the next day we're working on hotels and restaurant franchises for national clients," Helmer said.

Howard and Helmer has gone on to design many prominent Wichita buildings, including the Commerce Bank headquarters at the Waterfront, the new Via Christi Hospital on St. Theresa in west Wichita, the East Branch YMCA and Central Christian Church. It has designed numerous buildings for Wichita State and area school districts.

After 10 years in business, the firm moved from rented offices on South Rock Road to a building it designed on North Rock. It added a second building 10 years later, and opened an office in Overland Park in 2002.

"We wanted to expand our fishing pond, so to speak," said the firm's president, David White. "Wichita, for its size, has a fairly high percentage of architects. Not that Kansas City is much better, but it gave us an opportunity to spread out a little bit more."

White became the firm's president two years ago as part of a transition that the founders hope will help the firm continue after they leave, Helmer said. White has been with the firm 26 years.

"It's grown just because of a good, consistent, client-oriented way of doing business," White said. "Our number one goal is to take care of the client."

The firm has a diverse list of clients, such as hospitals, churches, commercial clients and schools. Individual architects tend to specialize. For instance, David Riffel, the first architect hired by Howard and Helmer, has tended to work on hospitals.

"There are so many systems you have to integrate" in a hospital, Riffel said. "It's a challenge. I enjoy working on them."

"We feel like we're really very diverse in our design styles," White said. "Our goal is to tailor each project to a specific client, their culture, the look that they want to convey with their brand."

Helmer and White said the biggest change in the architecture business has been technology that's changed the way they do and present their work. Clients' expectations have changed as well. "Clients really demand more, faster," White said.

The firm plans several events to mark its 30th anniversary. The first, held last month, saw employees join with Central Christian to participate in the Love Wichita city-wide cleanup. Together, they helped repair and clean up an elderly woman's house.

"We couldn't think of a better way to celebrate 30 years in business than rolling up our sleeves and working with one of our clients to give back to the community," Riffel said.

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