

Long Island Business NEWS

Where Business Gets Down to Business

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He was green when it was plain 'energy conscious'

By Ambrose Clancy

Architect Frank Relf got his big break in his own backyard.

After earning a degree in architecture from the New York Institute of Technology in 1976, Relf and a college buddy hit the road. Long Island was sparse of opportunities, but the duo struck gold in the Sunshine State, working with a NASA team designing hangars for grounded space shuttles. But Relf longed for home, and moved back to the Island around 1980 and scored a job in Manhattan designing solar houses. Soon after, when federal tax credits for green buildings dried up, Relf was out, and so he took the leap and formed Frank G. Relf Architect in his Baldwin basement.

That first year the firm took in less than \$100,000 but last year revenues topped more than \$2 million. The Huntington office now employs 12 people and over the years has been part of \$1 billion worth of construction in the metropolitan area, as well as south to Delaware and north to Massachusetts.

Success has been built by carefully plotted and adhered to strategies, none more important than mentoring and training young staffers. "I'm a strong proponent of recruiting young people into the firm," he said. But there is a practical aspect to giving young people a chance. Training people in your methods and work styles makes the whole team better. "I call it 'growing my own,'" Relf said.

In a head-spinning world of technological change, Relf also wants "people who are up to speed rather than 20- or 30-year veterans who are less knowledgeable," he said.

Sticking to what works is another plan Relf never strays from. "I know what we're good at and the outside world knows what we're good at," he said. "Stay true to your strengths."

The areas of expertise the firm has a solid lock on are emergency-services design such as firehouses, burn centers and fleet maintenance garages; self-storage facilities to the tune of designing more than 10 million-square feet of storage space over the years; and restaurants, which Relf counts in "the hundreds," including numerous fast food places, as well as sophisticated tablecloth eateries on the Island.

What has become a buzzword has been a tested growth tool for Relf. "Strategic alliances are a strong way to expand a business," he said. Relf has made alliances with specific consultants and electrical, plumbing and engineering firms. And it's not just getting together after a contract's signed. "Sometimes we go after work together," he said.

Relf is not a fan of outsourcing. "It's a stopgap when you're trying to fill a quick need when you're jammed up," he noted. "But the quality suffers as a result. Don't lose control of your work."

Back to where he started, Relf believes in having faith in the future and being ready when it comes. "When I started there was no such thing as 'green,'" he said. Relf has used the term "energy conscious design" for 25 years.

"We've always stayed in the forefront and now more than ever green is hot, but it's also required in many instances," he said, citing the towns of Babylon and Islip which have requirements for all new municipal facilities to be green.

"It warms my heart that being green is cool now," Relf said. "Before it was a burden, but it's been recognized as being important to the planet, and those of us involved in energy conscious design aren't considered pioneers anymore."