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Niche construction firm growing strongly

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NORTH COLLEGE HILL - From Cincinnati's riverfront to Over-the-Rhine to Hamilton County's suburbs, the work of Rod-Techs Inc. is evident across the region.

Founded in 2000 by Chris Packer, 35, and Luther Yates, 40, the iron and steel working firm is in the midst of its most successful run to date in spite of the economic hammering taken by much of the construction industry.

Over the past two years, North College Hill-based Rod-Techs has landed multi-million-dollar jobs installing rebar and reinforced steel at The Banks riverfront development of planned retail, residential and office space. The company is working at 41-story Great American Tower at Queen City Square, soon to become the city's tallest skyscraper, and has landed a variety of local public school projects.

"It's just been flowing in for us, and we haven't stopped growing," says Packer, the firm's president.

"But we've had a lot of help on along the way," adds Yates, Rod-Techs' vice president.

The two men credit companies such as Monroe-based Baker Concrete and Green Township-based DDK Construction for introducing Rod-Techs to new projects and helping the firm overcome hurdles.

"Anytime we've had a question they would find someone to take care of us," Packer says.

The mentoring has gone far to yield new relationships. At The Banks, Rod-Techs was tapped as a subcontractor for Hamilton-based Lithko Contracting Inc. The project is an estimated \$2 million deal for Rod-Techs.

"They've done a very nice job, but that's not to say we didn't have some hiccups along the way," says Butch Sullivan, who leads Lithko's Cincinnati office. "Every project has its challenges, and the key to growth for small companies like Rod-Techs is their ability to enter into agreements and hold up their obligations. That's been a critical part of Rod-Techs' success today."

Less than a block away from The Banks' site, Rod-Techs landed its largest deal yet - a \$7 million subcontract to provide the reinforcing steel work on Great American Tower at Queen City Square at the corner of Third and Sycamore streets. There the firm is working with Baker under the project's main contractor Turner Construction.

"It's probably the most critical contract on the job," says Bob Grace, Turner's project executive. "There were some times when all the work seemed to come at one time for them - between The Banks and the tower - and they were able to lean on Baker to share some manpower. That's exactly what these mentoring relationships are designed to do."

Prompter pay arrangements with larger contractors also has kept Rod-Techs ahead. For example, while typical pay schedules run every 30 days from contractor to subcontractor, Lithko agreed to pay Rod-Techs weekly at The Banks.

"Most small construction companies that fail are actually very successful, but it's their cash flow that

prevents them from being able to do more business," Sullivan says. "Helping young (companies) be successful is really going to be beneficial for us, too."

Humble start

Less than a decade ago Packer and Yates had a different story to tell.

Long-time friends and Westwood residents, both men were working full-time jobs but struggling to make ends meet. Packer ran a varied lot of jobs for his uncle's small iron working firm. Yates was clocking in an hourly rate as a claims specialist for the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation.

"At the end of the week, we'd sit down and talk to each other about how rough things were," Packer recalls. "Then we got a break."

After wrapping up a small job along the Ronald Reagan Cross County Highway, a representative with DDK Construction asked Packer if he would consider bidding on a project along Bridgetown Road.

"I knew how to do the billing. I knew how to write up the orders," Packer says. "I really knew how to do everything, except how to start up a business."

Packer pulled Yates in on the opportunity, and the men agreed to dive in.

Yates says he spent countless hours searching Web sites to figure out what state forms and fees needed to be paid to become a legitimate business.

"At one point I had to tell my wife, 'We can either pay the rent or the Secretary of State's fee to register our business name,'" Packer recalls. "We were that tight."

The men prevailed, and after the job was finished, Rod-Techs received its first paycheck: a \$50,000 profit.

"I will never forget that day," Packer says.

Bright future

Now, the firm has launched a second company: Construction Services Inc.

The side firm focuses on clean-up and other general labor services at construction sites across Cincinnati. Most of Yates' and Packer's employees are graduates of the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency's Blueprint for Success work program.

As employees sign on for work they're introduced to opportunities for apprenticeship programs with Rod-Techs or other firms, Packer says.

"Our main goal is to help people learn some new skills and target ways to put the community to work."
