



SMALL BUSINESS

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A REPORT ON SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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LORAN WEIB PHOTO

Cherilyn Milton, left, is the vice president of project and development for Projects by Giffin and Crane. Christine Clayton, right, is the president of the small boutique construction firm.

When thinking small pays off

Construction company handles jobs larger firms won't do

BY DALE WAMSTAD

Special to the Business Times

Even with the real estate market in the slumps, one small Santa Barbara construction company is holding its own by focusing on small projects larger firms won't touch.

Projects by Giffin & Crane is a women-run construction business and a division of Giffin & Crane General Contractors, a firm locally renowned for building many of the multimillion-dollar houses in the Santa Barbara area. Firm founders Bruce Giffin and Geoff Crane started the new division to take on smaller projects that the original company wouldn't normally do.

The projects division is now managed by Christine Clayton, president, and vice president of project development Cherilyn Milton.

With two full-time and two part-time employees, Projects by

Giffin & Crane typically has two to four construction jobs going at any given time. Currently, the firm is remodeling two master bathrooms and a deck. A bathroom usually takes four to six weeks to remodel if cabinets, windows and plumbing fixtures are available before starting, Clayton said. A kitchen remodel takes somewhat longer and the cost of construction varies depending on the owners' preferences and the needs of the job.

While Clayton and her employees usually do minor demolition and carpentry on projects, the company subcontracts out about 90 percent of its work — allowing it to operate with a small core staff.

The majority of the project firm's clientele are baby boomers and seniors living in Santa Barbara County. Even though it's been chained to the sunken residential real estate market, the

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small construction company is keeping its head above water. Prior to the economic downturn, the company pulled in about \$2 million in revenue a year, but dropped to \$1.2 million in 2009. Although business isn't close to what it used to be, the work is "quiet, but balanced," Milton said.

Clayton was optimistic about the firm's future. "We're still a new company and we've taken this opportunity to get our name out in the world," she said. She took the helm as president of Projects by Giffin & Crane in 2008, after working as the senior estimator at Giffin & Crane General.

Milton, who was recruited by Giffin and Crane to start the projects division, began as president at the division's inception, but has since stepped down, allowing Clayton to perform more of the administrative functions. Milton was previously a designer for California Projects and worked with Giffin & Crane General.

The projects firm is also big on philan-

thropy. It supports nonprofit Girls Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara by encouraging girls and young women curious about careers in the construction industry to pursue their interests.

And after the Tea Fire, Projects by Giffin & Crane offered its services and resources pro-bono, building a modest house for a woman who had lost her home to the fire. "We are blown away by contractors who have completely given away and donated to us, allowing us to do so much for one woman," Clayton said.

So what's it like to be a woman running a construction company in a predominantly male industry? Both Clayton and Milton say that it's an advantage. "We have a different approach as women and we're naturals in construction ... there's no male-to-male competition," Milton said.

"Women working with women communicate at the same level," she continued.

"Coming over to Projects gave me a different view on things," Clayton said. "Most of the time, when doing a project, we meet with the women of the household and we can communicate with them much better."