

Wired For Success

BY CHERYL MAH

SOLO District,
Burnaby



Surviving in today's challenging economy is an achievement for any business, yet alone thrive. Coquitlam based Allwest Electric celebrated its 10 year anniversary last year. A remarkable success story given the owner was only 25-years-old when he founded the company and then was hit with one of the worse global recessions in 2008.

While the company capitalized on the construction boom in the early to mid 2000s, the recession was an eye opener.

"I started the company at the best time and the worst time because when the recession hit...I've never seen or experienced anything like that," says Allwest owner and president Anthony Dallazanna. "We went through large layoffs and there was very little work and if you did find work, we were bidding jobs below cost to keep our guys busy."

During that tough period, Dallazanna turned to his father for advice and guidance. His father, now

retired, had operated his own electrical company in B.C. since 1972.

Dallazanna said the best advice his father gave him was to "surround yourself with the best people and the rest will take care of itself" and that's exactly what he did.

"We slugged our way through it. We did what we had to do to survive and we kept our core employees working — that was key," he says. "The true test of a good company is the trying times. In difficult times you see the true value of the business and how they treat their people and survive those times."

As the saying goes, they weathered the storm and today business is good.

With projects primarily located in the Lower Mainland, Allwest offers a full range of electri-

cal contracting services but is best known for its residential highrise work.

Current notable projects include the Sovereign, SOLO District (phase I) and Station Square Mall redevelopment in Burnaby and Granville at



St Thomas More High School, Burnaby



70th in Vancouver. All four are mixed use developments involving multiple residential towers.

The most significant is SOLO District (an acronym for South of Lougheed), a master planned community comprised of four residential towers and approximately 350,000 square feet of commercial space. It is the company's largest design-build project to date.

"We're excited to be a part of these projects not only because of the sheer size but the way they're going to change the areas," says Dallazanna, describing the current market as busy but very competitive.

SOLO District by Appia Development is going to redefine the Burnaby skyline and the Lougheed Highway corridor while the Sovereign by Bosa Properties will be the tallest mixed use hotel/condo in Burnaby when complete.

Other projects the company has worked on include Jameson House, Corrections Canada Regional Headquarters and St. Thomas More High School.

"We've worked twice at the St. Thomas More High School — a fine arts wing addition and then more recently a new gym. A special project because I graduated from that school," notes Dallazanna.

Born and raised in Vancouver with an electrician father meant Dallazanna, 36, was exposed to the construction and electrical industry at a young age.

"I've learned everything from him and continue to do so," says Dallazanna, who worked high school summers for his father or general contractor brother.

After graduating with the architectural and building technology diploma from BCIT in 1996, he completed his electrical apprenticeship with his father at Inlet Electric.

"Once I got out of the BCIT program, I wanted to work with my hands and I really enjoyed

Strong relationships with leading developers have meant repeat business.

my apprenticeship," he recalls. "My dad had really good people and they trained me well."

While he credits his father as a mentor, Dallazanna describes his working relationship with his father as "two bulls in a pen." So wanting to be independent, he struck out on his own in 2002. Since then, Dallazanna has grown the company from a one man show to 200.

The people are what he cites as the reason for the company's success.

"I have some of the best people in town. We have really good people here and it's one reason why we have customers coming back," he says adding some of the same people he apprenticed under are with the company today. "When I started on my own, they followed me to my business and that speaks volumes to the loyalty and dedication they have."

Strong relationships with leading developers have meant repeat business. It also serendipitously expanded the company into Alberta where Allwest's sister company Grand West Electric (GWE) was established.

"Bosa Developments was doing a project in Alberta [The Riverwest Towers in Calgary] and asked us if we wanted to do it. At the time it was supposed to be one project and 11 years later we're still there," says Dallazanna, adding GWE just moved into a new and larger office in Calgary.

Having a presence in Alberta also helped to offset some of the initial slowdown when the recession hit. The company felt it first in B.C. but still had work in Alberta carrying them through. When B.C. recovered, work in Alberta dried up.

"We tend to find Alberta lags B.C. about 18 months for the type of work we do, which actually worked well for us when the recession first hit... but then we got hit pretty hard in Alberta when jobs we had slated to go were put on hold,"

Sovereign by Bosa Properties, Burnaby



says Dallazanna. “We had to wind down to a handful of staff in Alberta. But we were dedicated to stay there, fought through it and things have recovered nicely.”

As the company grew, Dallazanna slowly moved out of the field and into the office. No longer hands on with projects, his focus today is on business development and sustained growth for the company.

“What I’ve really enjoyed in the last year and half is watching the younger kids develop and grow....It’s been very rewarding,” says Dallazanna, wryly acknowledging some of the “younger” apprentices are his age.

Allwest fosters a family-friendly workplace culture, hosting fishing trips and an annual family BBQ. Last year’s BBQ was particularly special with the celebration of the company’s 10th anniversary.

“Growing up in a family business, that’s just the way it was. My dad always treated everyone like family,” says Dallazanna.

Of course, no construction company can be successful without a good safety record. As part of the company’s commitment to safety, it was recently COR certified.

“That was a big undertaking,” comments Dallazanna. “Getting COR certified was very important to me and we’re better for it. Before safety

Allwest fosters a family-friendly workplace culture...

was something that had to be done; now it’s become a part of our culture.”

Allwest also offers in-house training for professional development whether it’s for code upgrades or supervision classes.

“Technology is constantly changing especially in the electrical field,” he says. “There’s always

something new. We’re not just power wiring anymore — it’s communications and home automation... so we have to always try to stay on top of it.”

Another way to stay up-to-date is to be involved in the industry. Dallazanna has volunteered on the BCSA Electrical Technology Advisory Committee and served on the ICBA board of directors.

“I learned a lot when I served on the ICBA board,” he says. “ICBA gives the open shop a voice in the industry and provides our benefit services. People underutilize what ICBA can offer.”

Dallazanna has proven he knows what it takes to survive the cyclical nature of the construction industry and has his goals set for the continued growth of the company.

“I get up excited to go to work every day. Every day presents a new opportunity and new surprise. Never a dull moment,” he says.

When he is not working, Dallazanna devotes his time to his young family of three girls. **CB**