

AT WEST CHESTER MECHANICAL, EVERYONE IS FAMILY

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Contractor of the Year

Two card tables, one copy/fax machine, a \$2,000 loan and a basement office — that's what **Mark Rogers** had to work with when he set off to build his own mechanical contracting company as a young steamfitter in Philadelphia.

That was early 1996. Last year, West Chester Mechanical Contractors brought in \$40 million in revenue. But success has come neither fast nor easy for the Philadelphia native. It has taken sleepless nights, a ridiculous amount of hard work, and help from some really good people along the way.



HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Owning his own mechanical contracting business certainly wasn't in Rogers' plans when he graduated high school. In fact, he was on scholarship to play baseball at a local university.

"I was a pitcher, but I blew my arm out and couldn't pitch anymore, so I quit school," he says, adding that it was a blessing in disguise. "I knew an office job wasn't what I wanted to do. I didn't want to sit behind a desk."

He was dating his now-wife, **Colleen Rogers**, at the time, and her father happened to be a steamfitter in Philadelphia.

"He said, 'Why don't you take the test to be a steamfitter?' And I said, 'What the hell is a steamfitter?'"

That was the fall of 1985; he began his apprenticeship through Steamfitters Union Local 420 in January 1986.



Photo credit: Jen Ames/PMA

Rogers receives MCAA's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award, this past March during the organization's annual conference in San Diego.

"I was fortunate enough to get hired at Herman Goldner Co. in Philadelphia," Rogers says. "I spent my entire five-year apprenticeship with them, and it's there that I started to learn about company culture and family atmosphere. And mentors — they had a ton of them."

He finished his apprenticeship there and decided to test his luck in the industrial sector. He landed a job working at a refinery.

"I was recently married and had a son, and I wanted to work some overtime and pay down some bills," Rogers explains. "I worked down there about a year, then went back to Herman Goldner Co., where I became a foreman with them and began running little jobs here and there. But I knew I wanted more. I knew I wanted to rise up a little higher, if you will."

Rogers, who would also disc jockey at bars and events a few times a week, decided to go back to the refinery to work for a friend.

"He said I could come over and start a commercial division for his industrial company. That's what I wanted to do," Rogers says. "I got over there, but things didn't really work out the way

I thought they were going to work out, or how he thought they would. After a year or two, I knew that I wasn't going to be given the opportunity to start the commercial division I wanted."

Eventually, something had to give.

"The day after Thanksgiving in 1995, I went into the office, and we started having a little discussion. We really didn't quite see eye-to-eye on it and I took offense, stood up, looked at him and said, 'I'm out of here.'"

Rogers recalls calling his wife immediately afterward to tell her he was on his way home. "She said, 'Oh you got off early!' And I said, 'You could say that.'"

At 30 years old and with a wife and two children to support, he got through the holidays by disc jockeying. Then, in March of 1996, he founded West Chester Mechanical in the basement of his home.

"Suite B' on our business cards was my basement, but I wanted people to think I was established," Rogers recalls with a laugh. "We had two six-foot tables and a copy machine, and we borrowed \$2,000 to get started."

While he was getting his business off the ground, he also continued disc jockeying Wednesdays through Saturdays while his wife worked as a bartender on Sundays and Mondays.

"I'd get up at 5 a.m. and get in at 2 a.m. those nights for three years. That's how the company was able to get off the ground."

BUILDING A BUSINESS

From the very beginning, Rogers knew exactly the kind of company he wanted to run, thanks in part to the time he spent at Herman Goldner Co. and UA Local 420.

"I learned from them that if you hire good people and treat them fairly, treat them like they're part of something and let them be part of the decision-making process, good things are going to happen," Rogers says. "From day one, from the people we hired



Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

Mark Rogers is owner and COO of West Chester Mechanical in Chester, Penn.

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Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

Rogers prefers to call West Chester employees his “coworkers” and can often be found with them on the job site.

and the culture we started to create, that was evident very early on.”

With his stated goal to be the best mechanical contractor in the area, with the best team of people, West Chester Mechanical slowly began to get more work. The year it opened, they did \$250,000 in total revenue.

“Then, the following year, I got a call from a fellow engineer,” Rogers says. “That second year, we did \$1 million worth of work, most of it in their facility. It helped us get off the ground and try to start to do more work in places and establish our name. I wanted to establish our name.”

But Rogers knew he had a lot to learn about the business. He became involved with the Mechanical Contractors Association of Eastern Pennsylvania in order to “just to be around other people who did what I was doing,” he says. “I became a sponge. I’d listen to them and be around them and find out what I needed to do to be better and become profitable.”

He soon became involved with the MCAA (Mechanical Contractors Association of America), and in 1998, he and his wife attended their first MCAA conference. That was where he met MCAA CEO **John Gentile** when he was least expecting it.

“My wife and I went to an excursion on Sunday before the convention, and we ended up going to a culinary school instead of a winery because of a mistake in our itinerary,” Rogers recalls. “But we still went and had a great time.

“Then, Monday night of the convention, we’re getting ready for dinner and there’s a knock on the hotel door, and there’s a man holding a crystal candy dish. He said, ‘I understand there was a mix-up in your trip and you were supposed to go wine tasting yesterday.’ He said they knew it was our first convention, and MCAA strives to be the best, and he handed me the crystal dish and the candies and a refund check for what we paid for the wine tasting.

“The guy standing there with the check was John Gentile. I said to my wife, ‘That’s the guy who runs this whole thing.’ That he thought enough to come do that made me think a lot about MCAA and its family. From that point forward, I got to know him and got involved in the MCAA’s education committee in 2000.”

Rogers says his relationship with MCAA quickly blossomed, and it has been invaluable to him.

“I got to meet some terrific and talented people on that committee. Many of them had established companies, some a few generations old, and to be around them it made me better at what I did. You have to listen. If you get in the room with smart people, you listen.”



Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

West Chester Mechanical’s scope of work includes HVAC, piping, and service work at universities, hospitals, secondary schools and many other commercial buildings in the Philadelphia area.



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Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

At West Chester Mechanical, family comes first.

He quickly became heavily involved in MCAA.

“I just jumped in and volunteered for committees. I got on MCAA’s Board of Directors in 2003. In 2008-2009, I got onto the executive committee, and in 2011, I was elected president at 45 years old. That also really started to develop my interaction with the UA [United Association] on a national level.”

At the UA’s 2011 convention, Rogers gave a speech onstage, and though he managed to get booed by audience members when he insulted a rival sports team, he still counts it as one of the highlights of his career.

“Every five years, the UA has a convention and invites the MCAA president to address the delegates, and it just happened to be my year in 2011,” he says. “If you would’ve told me back in 1991 that in 2011 I’d be onstage in front of thousands of UA members, I’d say you’re absolutely nuts.”

Rogers continues to serve on many funds and MCAA committees, one of which meets regularly with the UA General President **Mark McManus** and his leadership team.

“They are a terrific group of people who are dedicated to providing the best training, which produces the best workers in the industry,” Rogers says. “Without this partnership, our company would be just an average organization.”

This spring, in recognition of his numerous contributions to the organization and the industry, Rogers received MCAA’s highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award. He currently serves as president of the Mechanical Contracting Education & Research Foundation (MCERF).

CREATING A COMPANY CULTURE

Rogers stressed that neither the company’s success nor his own personal success would be possible if it weren’t for his “coworkers,” as he prefers to call the men and women of West Chester Mechanical. He knew very early on, thanks in part to his time at Herman Goldner, that in order to be the best, he had to have the best people. And to have the best people, he had to treat them well and cultivate an environment of mutual respect and trust.

“When I was working, I always wanted the boss to come out and ask if we needed anything and tell us if we were doing a good job. Everybody is making the same amount of money. They could go work anywhere else. But do you feel appreciated and part of the team? I knew we needed to create that here. And everybody around here knows that, too.”

Rogers truly appreciates his coworkers’ hard work, and he is not shy about letting them know.

“I try to stop on every job as often as possible, and I shake everybody’s hands, no matter where they’re at — whether in a ditch or a 120° F mechanical room,” Rogers says. “I ask how they’re doing and give them money for coffee or lunch.”

Rogers’ coworker **John McNeila**, vice president of West Chester, was one of the company’s first employee in early 1999,



Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

Each year, West Chester Mechanical hosts a golf outing for its employees and their family members.



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Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

In Philadelphia, West Chester Mechanical is synonymous with quality and reliability.

though they had met more than a decade prior while completing their apprenticeships through Steamfitters Union Local 420. He says the company is absolutely “a family business” and that Rogers’ passion for the industry — and compassion for the men and women of West Chester Mechanical — is infectious.

“There’s no hardship he won’t help resolve. That’s just who he is,” McNeila says. “He’s a very caring and compassionate guy. There’s a million stories where he’s helped people who were having issues. Give you

an exact story? I can’t — it’s every day.”

Not only does Rogers help those who are struggling without hesitation, he also helps people advance and succeed in their careers.

“Mark, to be honest, is the type of guy who is very dedicated and passionate about what he does — and more so about people and developing people and seeing them succeed,” McNeila says. “That’s really his niche. That’s what he likes. He’s not a big ego guy. He’s about giving back.”

One individual whose life Rogers has

changed — on both professional and personal levels — is **Brian McCarry**, an estimator for West Chester Mechanical. He has been with the company for 15 years now, working his way up from a truck driver shortly after high school to his current position as an estimator.

‘You have to listen. If you get in the room with smart people, you listen.’

“He definitely sees things in people that they don’t see in themselves,” McCarry says. “I say that I would’ve fired myself many times if I were him, but he allows people to make mistakes and learn from them and will help you along the way to realize your own potential and help you become your own person.”

Rogers took McCarry under his wing and even gave him a place to stay when he needed it, which both McNeila and McCarry say is not the least bit out of character for him.

“Anyone who works there is automatically accepted as family,” McCarry says. “Their families’ needs go before the company’s needs. Once people come to West Chester, they very rarely leave because of that.”

BEST OF THE BEST

Of course, as a successful and respected Philadelphia-area contractor, West Chester Mechanical is known for consistently providing top-quality work.

“I enjoy working with them. I know sometimes there are things you have to watch out for with a contractor, but with West Chester, you breathe a sigh of relief,” says **Ryan Rose**, senior project manager at a local university. “They’re organized, and their guys do the right thing.”

Rose says it took a while for him to realize that Rogers, who was always hanging around the job site, was actually the owner of the company.

“He was involved heavily and has stayed involved. On any major project, he’s heavily involved he always answers the phone.”



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Photo credit: West Chester Mechanical

West Chester Mechanical maintains a close relationship with Steamfitters Union Local 420 in Philadelphia.

Like Rose, Dahms appreciates West Chester's consistency.

"They're very reliable, and when Mark says he's going to do something, it happens every time," he says. "We really enjoy working with them, and a lot of that is because of how they collaborate with us and how they cooperate. Construction is a very political-mind-game type of career, and West Chester gets it. They understand the process and why sometimes we may be asking for things a certain way, and they don't question it because they get it and know they're doing it right."

THE FUTURE OF WEST CHESTER MECHANICAL

At the tender age of 51, Rogers says he plans to hang around for a while yet, though he has considered the possibility of at least one of his three sons — **Bryan**, 26; **Kevin**, 23; and **Nolan**, 17 — someday taking over the family business.

"Bryan is now 26 and working as an assistant project manager, and any of my sons may or may not want to run the company," Rogers says. "I've never forced them into doing this, which is no different from what I feel for our people here. If they feel there's a better opportunity to take care of their families elsewhere, I want them to go there."

In the meantime, he plans to continue working with MCERF, volunteer, and find ways to partner with unions and organizations to improve the industry. And, of course, he'll continue doing what he can to make sure his coworkers are well taken care of.

"I'm blessed," he says. "I feel like I'm wealthy in that I have happiness, health, and I'm around good people. It has nothing to do with the financial side of it. I'm the wealthiest guy in the world. I absolutely feel that way."

When asked to impart some sage wisdom and advice for those looking to improve themselves or their businesses, Rogers says it's really quite simple: Listen.

"Listen to people. Listen to others who do what we do. Listen to the guys from the UA. When you listen, that's when you learn. That's what has helped us get to where we are now. And take care of the people around you. Be part of their lives and do for them, and good things will happen for you."



Photo credit: MCAA

Rogers speaks to MCAA members while receiving the Distinguished Service Award.

Rose also appreciates the consistency of having the same individuals work on projects, and it has helped the university develop a strong rapport with West Chester.

"It's been the same people the entire time I've worked with them. John [McNeila] and Brian [McCarry], **Pat McDonnell**, **Wayne Sheeran** in the field — it's the same guys. So you're not only getting a rapport with the guys in the meetings, you know the guys in the field, too. And it also means you have consistency. It's like their A game is what they bring constantly."

Vince Dahms, director of MEP construction at P. Agnes in Philadelphia, has been working with West Chester Mechanical and Rogers since 2014.

"They've been my mechanical subcontractors on the last two or three projects," Dahms says. "The big thing about West Chester and Mark is they have a true family culture. They're a group of people where there isn't a bad apple among any of them, and when you go to the office, it's like visiting old friends. They're great people, every one of them."