

At J.E. Richards Electrical Construction & Services, Teamwork is Key

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The Washington Construction News Special Feature

J. E. Richards, Inc., is a 320-employee, Beltsville, Md.-based electrical construction and services firm serving Washington D.C., Baltimore, and northern Virginia. President Joe Richards explains that it began as a one-man operation. We were incorporated on Feb. 1, 1983 as Richards Electric. We soon found out that there was already a Richard Electric, Richardson Electric, and a Richards Group of Washington in the DC area and I began receiving material invoices for these companies," laughs Richards, "so we decided to trade as J. E. Richards Electric."

J. E. Richards, a 2003 recipient of a Washington Building Congress Electrical Craftsmanship Award, boasts a list of core competencies that includes but is not limited to: fire alarm, life safety, and security systems, uninterruptible power supplies (UPS), building energy management systems, and commercial switchgear and generation. Richards says, "We're not shut out of any job. There's nothing too technical, too big or too small that we can't do. We're available to do anything that our customers send our way."

One area where J. E. Richards distinguishes itself from its competitors is in the electrical installation of biotech facilities such as Human Genome, Therimmune, Covance, and Medimmune. J. E. Richards's website states that the firm "specializes in the construction of biopharmaceutical, health care, related laboratory and commercial/industrial facilities." J.E. Richards lists Children's Hospital, Columbia Hospital, George Washington University Medical Center, Washington Hospital Center, Providence Hospital, Sibley Memorial Hospital, National Institutes of Health (NIH), International Monetary Fund and the Smithsonian Institution among its distinguished clients.

Despite annual sales of \$39.4 million in 2003 (up from \$33.9 million in 2002) and a workforce 320-strong (up from an average of 260), Richards maintains,



"We're a small company; mean we're big for electrical but small." Still, being classified as small suits Joe Richards just fine. He feels that adaptability and flexibility are important components to the success of J. E. Richards "It's important to have growth so our people have the opportunity for advancement; however, our growth is dependent on the local economy. If the local economy takes a nosedive and we are not growing, it feels like we are dying. Then it is better to shrink quickly until we can start growing again."

Being a small company but a large electrical company also gives J.E. Richards the opportunity to subcontract with some very well-known general contractors, and, at the same time, contribute to some of the major development projects in the D.C. metro area. Some of the firm's largest clients include Brown & Root, Clark Construction Group, Inc., HITT Contracting, James G. Davis Construction, the National Gallery of Art, Spaulding & Slye, and Tompkins Construction.

HITT Contracting, Inc. looked to J. E. Richards during its major renovation of the historic eight-story Hay Adams Hotel

in the swanky Lafayette Square section of downtown Washington, D.C., and again in 2003, when HITT put a team together to build the Medimmune biotech facility.

James G. Davis Construction Corporation enlisted the services of J. E. Richards to assist in the renovation of the Madison Hotel, which, located at the corner of 15th and M Streets, lies in the heart of downtown Washington D.C. Richards is also the electrical expertise behind Davis's 2004 construction of the Discovery Channel Data Center, which is located in Sterling, Va.

Whiting-Turner is using the expertise of J.E. Richards as it builds the Riggs Alumni Center, and Clark Construction Group relies on J. E. Richards as it builds the Kim Engineering Building, both of which are on the campus of the University of Maryland, College Park.

In response to a question about a 2004 report in Power Outlet magazine that states that the electrical industry is operating at a dangerously low level of skilled electricians and that an electrician shortage should continue through 2008, Joe Richards agrees, "Skilled electricians are hard to come by."

Despite the report's findings, Richards remains positive and confident. "I have what we need," he says, "but do not expect to continue rapid growth as we saw in 1999 through 2003."

J. E. Richards understands that safety is a critical issue on construction sites, and that a safe workplace, for many companies, could mean the difference between windfall and financial ruin. Safety is extremely important. With that in mind, Joe Richards has no problem investing in the safety of his employees and workplace to avoid unfortunate accidents. Chad Bittick, the J.E. Richards safety officer, is actively seeking to keep safety a top priority to ensure that J.E. Richards's jobsites are as safe as they can be. "Chad goes to new training seminars every quarter at Xcelcom headquarters in Connecticut. He'll learn new safety techniques and come back and convey them to the rest of the employees," says Richards.

One concept not lost on Richards is that training and experience are paramount to the future success of J.E. Richards. Richards understands the importance of surrounding himself with good people who possess valuable skills,

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J.E. Richards

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and he is confident that upon his retirement, although not slated to happen anytime soon, J.E. Richards will be in good hands. "I have two vice presidents. One is Ed McCarty who is the senior vice president. I've worked with Ed since he was 19 years old, and he's been my second-in-command since 1987," says Richards. "And the other, Dean Fleming, has been with me since 1998 and has been in the industry since 1976.

Our chief estimator, Danny Littleford, has been with us for 20 years. He came two weeks out of school and knows our operation from top to bottom."

But the training and experience so characteristic of J.E. Richards's leadership does not end with the top brass. "I would venture to say that we have more than 50 employees with more than 10 years of service with us. And several have over 15 years of employment. I've got a lot of the same guys that have been here since the early 1980s," Richards adds, "Most of our foremen have completed five years of apprenticeship with Local 26 IBEW. We encourage

continuing education for electricians and gladly pay for anybody who wants to take classes."

Richards attributes his well-trained, competent employees to the efforts of the IBEW Washington, D.C. local 26. He says, "The local union offers courses continuously. For their part, they have one thing to sell the electrical contractors: well-trained labor. They do this very well and we are proud to be associated with them.

J. E. Richards's small size is, in part, what makes it such a great place to work. The relaxed atmosphere and the even-keeled nature of Richards contribute to overall workplace



satisfaction. "If we have office grievances, employees just come to me. Anybody can come in here and talk about anything," says Richards. "I don't even have my phone calls screened."

Richards also understands the necessity of efficiency in trying to provide customers with the best possible and most cost-effi-

cient end result. He says, "We at J.E. Richards want to be known for our quality, for our fairness and for our ability to do anything our customers need done, and for completing our work on time. Equally important," Richards stresses, "is the idea of teamwork on the jobsite. Any project we work on, we want to be part of a team, and work together

toward the common goals.

With such a passionate avowal, it is clear that J.E. Richards has in place the components to realize these basic business principles well into the future.

For more information visit J.E. Richards online at www.jerichards.com or phone (301) 345-1300.



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