

## Despite Some Ups and Down, Bel Air Construction Owner Michael Watts Never Stopped Building... or Believing

by Nathan Lee Adamus

There's a reason that only a small percentage of people own their own business. It's a risky premise clouded in uncertainty. Just the mere thought of it is anxiety inducing. For the majority of us, delusions of grandeur are relegated to personal conversations with our imaginary friends during traffic-plagued Monday morning commutes.

Yet in April of 1981, at the ripe age of 22, Bel Air Construction owner Michael Watts decided to walk to the end of the small business high dive and jump off with his eyes closed.

"My father was in construction. His father was in construction. Even his father was in construction," he jokes. "It was in my blood. I always enjoyed construction. I worked alongside my dad as a teenager. He would always say, 'You know you get along well with people. You have great vision. You should start your own business.' So armed with little more than that, I decided to take his advice."

Now 35 years later, and that decision to leave the comfort of the nest to explore other opportunities seems like a no-brainer. But many

times during that journey, Michael had doubts.

"I started way earlier than I should have without the proper training, knowledge, and capital. Those first ten years were brutal," he says with a grin. Michael assumed that since he was a good contractor, he was already qualified to run a business. Mistakes happened, but he learned and pressed on. It was that persistence and drive that kept him going despite tedious nights, exhaustion, and financial struggles.

"I had to make up for what I didn't know with hard work," he said.

Michael ran head first into his first roadblock three years into his business venture—a crucial make-or-break time period for first-time business owners.

A developer contracted Bel Air to build seven houses. It was a game-changing opportunity, and one Michael assumed would elevate his business to new heights. But below the smooth exterior, a storm was brewing. Less than halfway through the project, the money train stopped making its scheduled stops.

"He (the developer) was doing far more

than not paying me and ended up going to jail," Michael added.

By the time everything was said and done, Bel Air Construction was out close to 30 grand, and the business was in serious trouble. With no work, no money and \$30,000 in bills, that deficit quickly swelled to well over \$60,000.

"We had to start using credit cards, which is never a good idea, but sometimes you have to do what it takes to survive. That 30 grand may as well have been a billion dollars," he laughed.

"I guess I could have declared bankruptcy, but I just couldn't do that. In my mind, that was not paying people I owed money to and I wasn't comfortable doing that."

It was at this time that Michael nearly gave up on his dream. But instead of taking a knee, he put his helmet and pads back on and gave it one final push.

"I made a decision. I decided I was going to figure out how to pay this off and then maybe I could quit."

It took Bel Air Construction almost seven

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years to dig out of their financial hole. Even then Michael didn't throw in the towel. He realized that if the business could survive what appeared to be imminent doom, there wasn't much it couldn't handle.

"In hindsight, those bad dealings were what caused me to become more focused and to learn what it would take to actually run a successful business."

Watts credits extensive marketing for keeping Bel Air afloat during several stagnant periods when other businesses were forced to close their doors.

"Most small businesses that fail overlook the importance of marketing," noted Michael. "They think that their customers will keep coming back. That's not true. You have to remind them that you're still there and you still have great products, opportunities, and pricing."

After 9/11, when most businesses panicked, Bel Air tripled their advertising budget. The gamble paid off and the business was left relatively unscathed. However, the housing market fiasco in 2007 was a more ferocious beast.

"That was brutal," Michael reflected. "It hit us a bit later... I'd say around the end of 2008.

Not only was the real estate market hit hard, but people lost confidence in everything."

Since the Industrial Revolution, Americans have been somewhat cautious of banks, salesmen, and contractors. The housing market implosion was evidence that those fears were realistic, and that we had all severely underestimated the number of wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. Trust would no longer be granted; it would have to be earned.

"It took a long time for that confidence to return, and it did so in bits and pieces," said Michael.

But even in the midst of all that uncertainty, Michael never lost faith... and he never stopped dedicating his time to helping others.

"That whole concept of helping is driven by my Christian faith. I realize how blessed I am as a person. God's gift to me in Jesus has been an amazing thing. For me to help others and bless others is a small way to give back. There's so much joy and pleasure in helping others."

That attitude is a big part of what makes Bel Air Construction so special. Their passion for giving back to the community doesn't end when they walk off the lot of a Habitat for Humanity project.

Their website is loaded with videos of Michael giving tips on everything from 'Selecting the Right Contractor' to '10 Ways to Save Money on a Home Renovation.'

"In the videos, what you'll see is that I enjoy giving that information out. I really do," Michael said with a smile. "The three pillars I built the business on are excellence, service, and people."

Over 35 long years, Bel Air Construction has earned the love of the community and the respect of their clients. They also have the support of a solid leader who understands that there's a lot more to life than quarterly reports and pushing product. He's also not shy about giving his staff credit for Bel Air's long run.

"One of the reasons we have such great longevity is our people, and we're so blessed to have that. If you were to walk in and meet any of them, you'd know instantly that they could work for any world-class organization."

But why would anyone on his team want to leave their cozy Bel Air Construction home? Well, there is that whole 'starting your own business' thing. Good news is that if they decide to jump ship, a great mentor is only a phone call away. [www.belairconstruction.com](http://www.belairconstruction.com)

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