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Sage advice catapults Mid Eastern Builders to the top

George B. Clarke IV says the best advice he ever received came from his father. “He told me, ‘Always try to hire someone better or smarter than you are,’” Clarke says. Sage advice that the younger Clarke says helped his company become one of the largest general contractors in the commonwealth.

Mid Eastern Builders, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2002, began operations two months after Clarke graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in civil engineering. “Our first job was to build \$3,600 worth of wood bumpers for a big warehouse,” Clarke says. “The bumpers prevented forklifts from hitting the walls of the Army Supply Depot in Richmond.”

On the heels of MEB’s second government contract — a renovation project at Ft. Lee that totaled \$500,000 — the up-and-coming contractor received a \$3.5 million contract to build an aviation support facility at Ft. Eustis. “It became the home of the Apache helicopters,” Clarke says.

MEB’s success was not beginner’s luck. “I had worked construction since I was 14 years old,” Clarke says. “I got a work permit and began working for my dad.” The elder Clarke, who retired soon after his son graduated in 1982, owned Kenbridge Construction Co. in Kenbridge and Kenbridge Building Systems in Richmond. The younger Clarke says, “The individuals who bought these companies helped me start MEB.”

In February 1998, *Virginia Business* named MEB as one of the top 10 contractors in Virginia. The company has evolved to become a diversified general contractor that completes most of the work on its projects in-house, including earthmoving, pile driving, site utility work, concrete placement, carpentry and steel erection. Areas of specialty include treatment facilities, pump stations, bridges, office buildings, warehouses and manufacturing facilities.

“We’re the most diversified general contractor in Hampton Roads. No one else builds bridges, treatment plants, processing facilities, refrigerated warehouses, office and retail buildings, tunnels and underground utilities.”

— George B. Clarke

“We’re the most diversified general contractor in Hampton Roads. No one else builds bridges, treatment plants, processing facilities, refrigerated warehouses, office and retail buildings, tunnels and underground utilities,” Clarke says. “Normally a general contractor does no more than 20 percent of any job.”

MEB’s diversity also includes having a financial stake in some of its projects. “We’re not just a general contractor,” Clarke says. “We’re



Natatorium (indoor swimming pool) at the recreation center at Hines School, Newport News. This project won the HRACRE Award for design and construction.

also a developer. Often an owner wants a contractor to assume some of a project’s financial risk. We have the financial capability to come in as part owner.”

Diversity has been a hallmark of MEB since before the company’s inception. “I like to do a lot of things at one time,” Clarke says. “I knew before I graduated that I didn’t ever want to design projects; I wanted to manage projects. I like dealing with people and making the projects come together. I’ve always liked the hands-on and the diversity of construction. One day I’m bidding a job, the next day I’m negotiating with an owner, and the next I’m deciding which crane to buy. It’s never a monotonous routine.”

Managing a varied practice has its challenges. “My biggest personal hurdle was learning to delegate authority,” Clarke says. “At first, it was just me. I was running everything. As the company grew, I had to hire project managers. About five years ago, I had to stop running projects. You can’t grow if you do not delegate authority to your staff.”

Operating from Holland Boulevard in Chesapeake’s Cavalier Industrial Park — right in the middle of Hampton Roads — Clarke says the key to MEB’s success has been heeding his father’s wisdom. “I’ve built this company around good people. We’ll do more than \$75 million this year and we’re projecting to exceed \$100 million per year within three years. We have 25 to 30 jobs going all the time. I have to have key project managers, superintendents, carpenters, laborers and an administrative staff I trust.”

That trust has generated a loyal, hardworking staff. “People who come to work for us stay with us. We have very little turnover.”

Savvy, smarts and skill contribute to Mid Eastern Builders' atypical growth

Mid Eastern Builders has undergone a metamorphosis during its 20 years. What began as a small company that pursued only government contracts has evolved into a multimillion-dollar company that handles all types of commercial, industrial, civil and utility construction projects.

"The first years were a hard climb, but we kept persevering," says George B. Clarke IV, president of MEB. "We honed our skills on small projects and then we started building larger projects. We grew in ways that are not typical."

Mark Olmstead, vice president, says the key was hiring the right people. "At about the 10-year mark we began adding people to our field operations." But MEB didn't recruit the employees. "An event would happen and the guys would come to us," he adds. "That was a great compliment. They wanted to work for us; they perceived us as fair and competent. Those guys are still here today — those bonds have never been broken."

One of those who approached MEB was Mike Dean. "I had worked for a small general contractor — Crowder Contracting Co. — building bridges and pump stations. When the owner retired, I came to MEB. Most of the employees came with me," Dean says.

"That enabled us to grow in an area we hadn't planned," Olmstead says.

Similar circumstances initiated MEB's venture into underground utilities. "The owner of another construction firm died without having a plan for his business to continue," Olmstead says. "One of the workers, Wayne Duff, said to me, 'Boss, you got a job for us over there?' Six months later we're running pipe crews."

Olmstead says Dean and Dave Ervin, who head up underground utilities, brought a tremendous amount of expertise with them. "Hiring them launched MEB into high-risk projects."

While MEB did not intentionally set out to build high-risk projects, timing was serendipitous. "In the early 1990s the Navy, Air Force and Army had less and less work; work was slowly disappearing. We noticed jobs were becoming more competitive and less profitable. We had decided to do something different. We wanted to branch out into the industrial and wastewater treatment markets," Olmstead says.

"We started building cofferdams. It was high risk and dangerous. The Hampton Roads Sanitation District was our first client," Clarke says.



MEB office staff



Fuel tanks at Craney Island

"They had large concerns but we convinced them we had the right savvy and expertise to perform this type of work."

The work snowballed. "Treatment work then led us to underground utilities, parking garages and tunnels," Olmstead says.

During this growth period MEB shifted its business philosophy. It entered into negotiated, private contracts.

"Negotiated work is much different from getting a contract based on being the low bidder," Clarke says. "With negotiated work, you're partnering with the owner. It's a different way of doing business."

"The first years were a hard climb, but we kept persevering. We honed our skills on small projects then we started building larger projects. We grew in ways that are not typical."

— George B. Clarke

With a change in focus, Clarke hired Tom Atherton to head up the company's business development. "MEB wanted to focus more on the private market and increase the size and complexity of all of our projects. The work was there. MEB just hadn't pursued it," Atherton says. "My challenge was to convince people that our strengths extended beyond their understanding of our capabilities."

Today MEB's five divisions include private industry, private development, private building/design-build, public works/infrastructure and government contracts.

"We pride ourselves on diversity," Atherton says. "We build everything from bridges and water treatment plants to warehouses and office buildings, and we self-perform a ton of work. We have utility, site work and pile crews as well as concrete, carpentry and finish crews. We are a self-performer of a diverse building portfolio."

MEB helps private industry engineer a greener environment

Clean air. Clean water. No noise. More and more businesses are incorporating pollution prevention strategies into their everyday business practices. Companies such as Carter Machinery, Norfolk Southern Corp., Ocean Marine, Phillip Morris and Smithfield Foods are turning to Mid Eastern Builders to help them rid their environments of noise, water and air pollutants.

Dave Ervin, vice president and senior project manager for MEB, says a big concern for MEB's corporate clients during the environmental upgrades is maintaining their day-to-day operations. "Corporate clients — first and foremost — don't want us to shut down their plants. They want us to install the systems that protect the environment and they want to ensure the safety of their workers and our workers while we're doing so, but they don't want our work to stop their operations."

So MEB works around their work. At Smithfield Foods, installing a \$2.3 million sewer project to prevent discharge into the Pagan River meant working inside a hog processing facility.

"Working in a processing plant offers many challenges. One of them is that because it is a slaughter facility, trucks are moving livestock in and out all day. We worked around Smithfield Foods' schedule and kept the plant running."

— Dave Ervin

"Working in a processing plant offers many challenges," Ervin says. "One of them is that because it is a slaughter facility, trucks are moving livestock in and out all day. We worked around Smithfield Foods' schedule and kept the plant running."

It wasn't easy. "We had to complete the work within the tight timeframe mandated by the commonwealth's Department of Environmental Quality," Ervin says. "We proved that we could get the job done, do a good job and keep the processing plant running."



Gwaltney plant expansion at Smithfield Foods Inc.



Norfolk Southern Corp. storm water management upgrade, Lambert's Point Railyard and Ship-Loading Facility

Because of that MEB received a contract from Smithfield Foods to build a refrigerated processing facility. Again MEB met the challenges.

"The plant was running three shifts. To accommodate its operations, we avoided peak seasons, the busy day shifts and holidays," Ervin says. "We also adhered to very rigid specifications required by the United States Department of Agriculture. And since we were tying onto buildings that were built 20 years ago, we meshed the construction both structurally and aesthetically."

Because MEB met those challenges, it is doing other work for Smithfield Foods.

Earthen polishing pond pulls coal dust from water

A few miles from Smithfield, MEB workers faced another "live" situation when it installed a system to prevent runoff from polluting the Elizabeth River. "Lambert's Point is the largest coal-handling facility in the world," says George B. Clarke IV, president of MEB. "DEQ had mandated that Norfolk Southern build a storm water treatment plant to prevent coal dust from polluting the river."

MEB built a five-acre earthen polishing pond that extracts coal dust from the storm water. "As the water goes through the polishing system, the coal ash is washed out. The color changes from deep black to almost clear. The water is so clear it almost looks as if you could drink it," Clarke says.

The \$8 million project required MEB to build a pump station, a concrete conveyance channel and two concrete clarifiers in the middle of a ship-loading facility. "I can't believe what we did inside seven active rail lines," Ervin says. "We had to coordinate all of our efforts with a flagman so as to not shut down Norfolk Southern's operations."

As with Smithfield Foods, DEQ had mandated a tight timeframe for the project. Although MEB met the deadline, it encountered many situa-

tions that could have caused delays. “We discovered a concrete pier that no one knew existed. It was at least 15 feet wide by 15 feet deep right in line with the pipeline we had to run. We had no choice but to jackhammer it out,” Ervin says.

Workers also discovered old railroad ties, abandoned steel bulkheads and wooden box culverts that one time had conveyed storm water. “We had to excavate 60,000 cubic yards of material before we could begin construction,” Ervin says. All of which had to be hauled out in between trains arriving and departing Lambert’s Point.

“And to get water to the treatment plant, we had to mine a tunnel under the rail lines with no interruption of rail service,” Ervin says. “We did such a good job that Norfolk Southern asked us to create wetlands.” That project — another treatment system — contains four ponds and treats storm water prior to its discharge into the Elizabeth River.

“Aesthetically, it looks incredible,” Ervin says. “It looks like a lagoon.”

MEB helps clean up another type of pollutant

When Richmond-based Phillip Morris Co. needed an updated system to treat its waste, it contracted with MEB.

“That project had a new twist. The facility processes tobacco and generates a different type of waste — tar,” Ervin says. “And we had another really tight timeframe — five months for a \$2 million upgrade to a wastewater treatment plant.”

The project entailed building several new structures and buying new equipment — a tobacco liquor storage tank, a tobacco liquor pump station, a screw conveyor system, a belt filter press and a gravity belt thickener. Because MEB had such a tight schedule, it had to release critical equipment and materials prior to the engineer approving them.

“We had lots of overtime, but we met the schedule,” Ervin says. MEB met Philip Morris’ strict safety standards and kept the plant running. “Our performance on the wastewater treatment facility has led to other opportunities with Phillip Morris.”

Environmentally controlled facility pampers mega yachts

On the southern branch of the Elizabeth River — at Mile Post Zero on the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway — Ocean Marine LLC and Flint Contracting Co. Inc. contracted with MEB to help construct a \$21.5 million boatyard capable of repairing and refitting pleasure yachts up to 235 feet.

“The repair facility features an 80-ton Travelift, a 1,250-ton Synchrolift and a rail transfer system,” says Ricky Blowe, vice president of MEB. “We are constructing the two major facilities — the yacht service center and the dry boat storage facility.”

The mega-yacht service building measures 140 feet by 240 feet and has a vertical clearance of 80 feet. “The entry doors, which were constructed in Finland, are made of fabric and measure 40 feet wide by 76 feet high,” Blowe says. “This project features a state-of-the-art, 122-slip, floating dock marina, a duel fueling station and a 1,000-linear-foot concrete face deck, as well as numerous other amenities.”

The facility, one of the tallest in Hampton Roads, is an environmentally controlled facility where workers repair and refinish yachts. The facility has a water reclamation system so no solvents will flow into the river and make their way into the Chesapeake Bay or the Atlantic Ocean. The dry boat storage facility will accommodate as many as 320 boats, including boats up to 40 feet long.



Yacht Service Center at Ocean Marine

MEB tackles noise pollution

A stone’s throw from MEB’s Chesapeake headquarters stands Carter Machinery Co. Inc., an authorized Caterpillar dealer. “We recently built a dyno room for them to test marine engines,” Blowe says.

A dynamometer is a machine that allows a controlled load to be applied to a running engine, which allows an engine’s performance characteristics to be measured.

“We created a pretty neat system,” Blowe says. “The dynamometer tests engines under real-life situations. Carter can drop an engine onto a trolley, roll it up to the dyno test stand and everything is exhausted out.”

Because the engines get hot during the testing, MEB installed four grates over the engine where it’s connected to the dynamometer. “A vacuum tunnel allows the air to move. Ventilation also comes in from under the floor. That was creative,” Blowe says.

MEB also installed an extensive silencer system. “It is unique in that the silencers reduce the decibel output at the source so it’s a quiet dyno room,” Blowe says.

Traditionally, the noise level is very loud — well over 150 decibels. “These are several thousand horsepower engines,” Blowe says. “Workers can wear headphones to dampen the noise, but if they open the door they throw the noise into the environment.”

To reduce noise pollution, MEB designed a system to remove the exhaust and the noise through the same system.

“If the doors are closed while the dyno is working, the decibel level is acceptable,” Blowe says. “You actually can have a conversation without screaming.”

MEB prides itself on diversity

Clarke says MEB’s main strength is its ability to construct many types of projects. “And we build the projects on time and within budget. We’re sensitive to our clients’ work schedules and we’re sensitive to their environmental needs. We help our clients engineer a greener environment.”



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MEB's financial strength allows it to develop many projects



Carter Machinery Development in the Cavalier Industrial Park

More and more owners want contractors to share the development costs of projects. For Mid Eastern Builders, that's not a problem. It has the financial capability to form joint ventures with many of its clients.

"We're trying our hand at development," says George B. Clarke IV, president of MEB. "Some owners want contractors to have financial stakes in their projects. We have that capability. We can come in as part owner."

Tom Atherton III, MEB's vice president of business development, says most of the development projects have "come in around \$5 million. We've built a couple of buildings for our own offices as well as for South Chem, a Chesapeake division of Brenntag; Systems East, a controls company in Hampton that wanted to expand; and Carter Machinery, a wholly owned Caterpillar dealership."

Clarke says, "It's the only dealership Caterpillar owns. The company didn't want to own its facilities when it relocated its power systems, rental and marine groups to Chesapeake." So Caterpillar contracted with MEB to develop a nine-acre parcel in Cavalier Industrial Park.

MEB built five buildings, totaling more than 50,000 square feet, for Carter during a two-year span that included a parts and rental store, a forklift maintenance shop and a marine dyno building. Carter Machinery then leases the facility from MEB.

"Although the construction is pretty basic — metal buildings with masonry exteriors — it's the largest development project we had done until recently," Clarke says.

MEB currently is developing a \$4 million project on five acres in the Greenbrier area of Chesapeake. "Eden Way Business Center is a five-building complex with 45,000 square feet of office and retail space," Clarke says. Tenants include Chartway Federal Credit Union, Stewart Title, Mid-Atlantic Eye Care and Greenbrier Lighting.

MEB also is building a two-phase, \$10 million project in the Langley Research and Development Park in Hampton. "Our first tenant is Raytheon. It leased half the space — just over 25,000 square feet," Atherton says.

If these "resumé-building" development projects prove successful, Atherton says, "we'll go on to bigger projects. We're not interested in high-rise office buildings, but we are interested in tapping into the hotel/motel market."

Forging relationships: The tale of two companies

by J. Gould, Carter Machinery Co. Inc.

In 1994, Carter Machinery Co. Inc. made a strategic business decision to invest in the future of its power systems business in the Hampton Roads market. As the authorized dealer for Caterpillar equipment and engine power systems products throughout Virginia, Carter determined that future business growth for its power systems division in this market depended upon increasing its product support capacity. At the time, it shared facilities with the construction division for its truck engine business and was at capacity at its marine engine facility in Norfolk. When the company decided to secure a new facility in which to base its generator and truck engine businesses, it began its search for a developer who understood the industry and had a vested interest in Carter's success.

When Carter Machinery discovered that Mid Eastern Builders was an industrial developer, a natural "marriage" was formed. Carter already had a strong business relationship with MEB — it supplied generators to MEB for a number of projects. The two companies soon reached an agreement — MEB would develop a build-to-suit facility and lease it to Carter. In 1995, the vision came to fruition with the opening of a 12,000-square-foot facility in Cavalier Industrial Park in Chesapeake. MEB's vast experience and construction proficiency proved vital to the project's success. Effective project management ensured smooth progress.

Based on the project's success, Carter's rental products division agreed in 1997 to have MEB develop an additional 20,000 square feet of office, shop and warehouse space on the adjoining property. The following year, the two companies consummated a lease addendum for MEB to develop a 20,000-square-foot addition to the original building. This allowed Carter to consolidate its marine engine business with the generator and truck engine businesses.

This "complex" has become somewhat of a showplace for MEB as it pursues similar business ventures. It is an example of how business relationships can be fostered to expand beyond their primary scope.



The Eden Way Business Center, Chesapeake

MEB offers basic general contracting services to a full turn-key project solution

Most general contractors are specialized; Mid Eastern Builders can do it all. It can develop sites, install utilities, build buildings and give owners turn-key projects.

“That diversity is one of our strengths,” says Tom Atherton, vice president of business development. “Three years ago, when we made a successful move to negotiated private work, our objectives were to build relationships, create a resumé of projects and build a solid referral base. We accomplished our objectives.”

MEB has negotiated work with such companies as Carter Machinery, Shaia Oriental Rugs, Capital Fasteners, BFI, Insulations Systems, Baymark, Smithfield Foods, Phillip Morris and Norfolk Southern.

Now the company is pushing a new facet — design/build. “Design/build means we provide architectural and construction services under one roof. That allows us to complete projects in a timely, cost-effective manner,” Atherton says. “It’s a win-win for the client and for us.”

The Smithfield Foods project, a more than \$1 million refrigerated processing facility, was mostly design/build. So were the five buildings for Carter Machinery and Capital Fasteners’ new office and warehouse.

Mark Olmstead, a company vice president, says of the \$2.85 million West Neck Clubhouse, “It’s an 18,000-square-foot, two-story clubhouse located near the Virginia Beach Courthouse. It is supported by reinforced-concrete bearing walls and hollow-core panels.”



West Neck Clubhouse, Virginia Beach

Arnold Palmer designed the golf course. “The clubhouse is first-class architecture. The owner, Dickie Foster, has not cut any financial corners. It’s a gorgeous, elegant clubhouse,” Olmstead says.

“We got the job because the owner believed we were the best choice.” He adds that MEB built the clubhouse in a “short” construction period. “This should have been a 12-month project. We had six.”

MEB builds the infrastructure that keeps the market growing

Building underground utilities, bridges and water treatment plants is dangerous, complicated and risky. Yet, says George B. Clarke IV, president of Mid Eastern Builders, “building the region’s infrastructure offers the company its most interesting projects.”

One such project is a joint venture with the California-based J.F. Shea Co. that will prevent sewage from discharging into the James River. “This is a \$30 million combined sewer overflow project in Richmond,” Clarke says. “The project involves a 6,000-linear-foot, 14-foot diameter tunnel and two shafts along the James River, a new pump station, a flushing structure, two regulators, rehabilitation of an existing pump station, extensive electrical control work and associated site work. It’s a very risky job.”

Dave Ervin, vice president and senior project manager, says preparing the site to mine the tunnels took approximately one year. “We’ve just started the mining. That process will take about four months even at an around-the-clock pace.” The project runs three shifts, 24 hours a day, six days a week. “Sundays are limited to maintenance on the tunnel-boring machine.”

The tunnel-boring machine is more than 400 feet long. “It took 20 tractor trailers to deliver it. And it had to be assembled in the bottom of the shaft,” Ervin says.

MEB/Shea performed extensive blasting work for the shaft excavation, starter tunnels and some more shallow utility installations.



Bird's eye view of a tunnel-boring machine being used on the CSO project, Richmond

Access to the project is through two vertical shafts that vary in depth between 80 feet and 100 feet. “Some points of the tunnel are more than 200 feet deep because of the topography,” Ervin says. “The trick to

(Continued on page 13)

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MEB builds the infrastructure (Continued from page 10)

entering the tunnel is either to climb a 100-foot ladder or climb into a basket that dangles from a crane.”

The basket holds as many as eight people at one time. “Then you walk or ride a train for about one-half mile to the tunnel-boring machine. You realize how dangerous and risky this work is as soon as you’re in the basket and lowered into the tunnel,” Ervin says. “The earth is above you and water is pouring in as if it’s raining. A big concern is if we hit a seam. Will the James River rush in on us? We have high-head pumps. In case a large amount of water comes in, we can pump it out.”

He says dealing with underground water is just one of the many challenges the project poses.

“This project will require more than 20,000 cubic yards of concrete,” he says. “Bringing trucks in would have been a problem, so we set up an onsite concrete batch plant. We’re batching our own concrete.”

Because the project is located along the north side of the James River beside the Powhite Parkway, blasting posed a safety threat. “We could blast only between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. and for short periods at a time. During those times, police completely shut down traffic on the parkway,” Ervin says. “This job is kind of hard to put into words. It’s something else — the wildest job I’ve ever done.”

Building bridges is all about creating things

Mike Dean says the most interesting bridge project the company has done is the rehabilitation of Norfolk’s 26th Street Bridge, a 600-foot, historic structure that spans the Lafayette River. “It’s a beautiful bridge but it was in a state of decay. We had to rehabilitate it from the bottom to the top.”



26th Street Bridge over the Lafayette River in Norfolk

The \$2.5 million project included repairing the approach roadway as well as the bridge substructures and superstructures. “We repaired the curbs and sidewalks, replaced the expansion joints and restored the bridge rails,” Dean says.

Every bridge has its own challenge, Dean says. “And the 26th Street Bridge was no exception.” It spans wetlands. “We worked closely with the city of Norfolk to protect the extensive vegetative wetlands.”

The water in the wetlands is very shallow. “We couldn’t float barges near the bridge. We had to design ways to put pile jackets on the bridge under water. We did and the city is very pleased.”

MEB’s most recent bridge project closed out ahead of schedule. “That was the Lucas Creek Road Bridge replacement in Newport News,” Dean says. “We constructed a 440-foot bridge with 11 spans. The project included storm sewers, sidewalks, curbs and gutters along a roadway that is approximately 800 feet long.” MEB also relocated a 712-foot waterline, mitigated wetlands and demolished the existing bridge.

When the fuel inspection was done, there was no punch list, Dean says. “That speaks a lot to our workmanship. One field superintendent,



Richmond International Airport parking garage expansion

Del Stewart, has 40 years’ experience building bridges and he demands perfection.”

MEB’s next bridge project is on a 14-mile section of road in North Carolina. “We will build 14 bridges that measure from 200 feet to 450 feet and span lots of creeks and swamps. The big challenge here is protecting the wildlife and the wetlands,” Dean says. “Bridges are beautiful. I just love to stand back and look at them. It’s all about creating things.”

Richmond Airport is building a better way to fly

The Richmond International Airport has embarked on a major construction program. “The most visible improvements to airport passengers are the parking garages,” says Stefon Artis, project manager. “Another contractor constructed the two existing garages. We’re called in to build a new 600,000-square-foot structure.”

This slab-on-grade facility with its three elevated decks is not “just” a parking garage, Artis says. “To the owners, it’s the Taj Mahal. They want it to be as architecturally pleasing as possible. They’re adamant about the aesthetics.”

The infrastructure market is growing

Clarke says the forecast for the infrastructure market is bright. “From Hampton Roads and Northeastern North Carolina to Richmond and Roanoke, the market looks good for bridges, utilities, roads, water and sewer. The infrastructure market is growing. It helps people flow better.”

When people flow better, he adds, “Lowe’s and The Home Depot are not far behind.”



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From A to Z: MEB's public sector projects require sophisticated skills

When Mid Eastern Builders shifted its focus three years ago to negotiated, private work, it did not abandon its commitment to the public sector.

"Quite the contrary," says Tom Atherton III, MEB's vice president of business development. "We're building everything from airport traffic control towers to zoological parks, and we're still building military barracks and warehouses."

The Virginia Zoological Park undergoes a \$10 million expansion

One of MEB's more exciting and more challenging municipal contracts is a new-style exhibit at the Virginia Zoological Park in Norfolk. "We are building an African Okavango Delta exhibit in a theme park-style setting," Atherton says. "Zoos are getting away from keeping animals in cages and are getting them into more natural ecosystems."

Visitors will meander through a naturalistic savanna environment on earthen walkways and elevated timber boardwalks, says Mark Olmstead, another of MEB's vice presidents. "You'll have the sensation of a self-paced walk with the animals through five ecosystems of Africa. You'll have the safety of natural barriers — you won't see steel bars — yet you'll be so close you'll be able to feel the lions' breath."

He says the zoo project is "atypical construction." Eighteen-inch diameter riprap prevents the rhinos from walking into the moats and strategically placed treefalls provide natural fences for the giraffes." The exhibit has few fixed dimensions. "That's one of the challenges. In this case you often have only the designer's renderings to work from, which requires a combination of creative license and construction experience."

The project's energy level is high. "This is a winning exhibit. The owner is excited and subcontractors are clamoring to be involved. There's nothing like it around," Olmstead says. "The walls are sculpted to resemble the Serengeti. The geologic strata have to be virtually identical to those found in that region." And it's not to just make it look authentic. "The animals will behave naturally if you replicate their environments."

The exhibit features two large moats — one for the elephants and one for the lions. Concrete piles support the bottoms of the moats. "That was our first large hurdle," Olmstead says. "We had to figure out how to excavate a hole large enough to drive pile driving rigs into the bottoms of moats."

From a construction standpoint, building the exhibit requires a high level of sophistication. "This project would be difficult if it weren't for the experience levels of our guys and our subs," Olmstead says. "We're working with national and international subcontractors."

One subcontracting crew — Zulu tribesmen — hails from South Africa. "They are constructing heavy timber and grass thatch roofs on the buildings. This is different for us. We're not just laying a course of block."

Olmstead adds that specialty contractors were also required to design and fabricate the hydraulic elephant and rhino doors.

Chesapeake toll plaza alleviates traffic congestion

Stefon Artis, MEB project manager, breathed a big sigh of relief in July when dignitaries cut the ceremonial ribbon that officially opened the Route 168 toll plaza. "Right until the very end we worked at a frantic pace to get the punch list done," he says. "It was a mad rush to the end."



The elephant/giraffe house, one of the exhibits included in the African Okavango Delta, is part of the Virginia Zoological Park expansion in Norfolk.

Dignitaries representing the city of Chesapeake, the commonwealth of Virginia and the state of North Carolina were none the wiser. "News crews were there, too," Artis says. "But all the work was done and all the materials were onsite when the toll plaza opened."

The toll plaza is designed to alleviate traffic congestion in Chesapeake from tourists on their way to North Carolina's Outer Banks. "MEB's portion of the project included the toll plaza, toll collection equipment, a 9,000-square-foot administrative building, a 600-square-foot maintenance building and an underground tunnel, which is 180 feet long," Artis says.

"MEB's portion of the project included the toll plaza, toll collection equipment, a 9,000-square-foot administrative building, a 600-square-foot maintenance building and an underground tunnel, which is 180 feet long."

— Stefon Artis

The toll plaza consists of eight stainless-steel toll lanes, two of which are dedicated "fast" lanes, in each direction. "The fast lanes are equipped with an Automatic Vehicle Identification system," Artis says. "This system enables cars equipped with electronic stickers on their windshields to pass through the toll lanes without stopping."

The electronic equipment was a substantial portion of the contract. "The computers required lots of programming," Artis says. "The computers track everything. If a car goes through the fast lane, the computer recognizes the number of axles, displays the amount charged, tells the driver to pass through then verifies the same number of axles exits the

(Continued on page 17)

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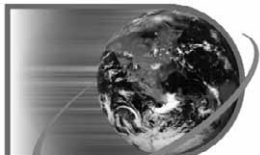
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From A to Z: (Continued from page 15)



Route 168 Bypass toll plaza

toll plaza as entered it. And the computer deducts the appropriate toll amount from the electronic sticker.”

Artis says drivers who think they can drive through the fast lane without paying the appropriate toll must think again. “The computer is programmed to take pictures every five seconds until it recognizes the license plate. Once the information is traced, the city will take the driver to court to collect the toll.”

In addition to the electronic equipment, Artis says the “hidden” portions of the toll plaza also are impressive. “We built a concrete key lock vault, with walls about 10 inches thick, inside the administrative building. The tunnel, which is 12 feet underground, allows the staff to get to their booths without crossing heavy traffic.”

Artis says he enjoyed the challenges this project presented. “It required a lot of coordination with the city, the architect and the consultant who specialized in toll equipment.”

Henrico’s reclamation plant is not your typical wastewater treatment facility

MEB currently holds two contracts with Henrico County to improve its wastewater treatment facility.

“One contract is for \$19 million and the other is just over \$2 million,” says Fred Wagner, senior project manager for the Richmond area. “The larger of the two is a complete renovation of the solids handling facility. The smaller project entails renovating and expanding the laboratory, which tests both wastewater and drinking water to ensure they meet acceptable limits for the environment and for the public.”

Wagner says the larger project is not a typical wastewater treatment plant. “It is more architectural in style — not a lot of pipe and concrete like other plants. The emphasis here is on elaborate finishes with an architecturally appealing exterior. It looks more like a school.”

Wagner says the project is high profile for Henrico count and one of the largest projects MEB has tackled on its own. “The original facility has not been operational for several years. When it’s complete, the plant will have the capacity to handle 75 million gallons of wastewater every day. The county administrators are visionaries. They’re looking at the county’s long-term, continued growth. This plant will take care of the county’s needs for several decades.”

New FAA tower enables air traffic controllers to view the entire airport

Air traffic controllers at the Roanoke Regional Airport have limited vision. “They can’t see the entire airfield from the tower,” Wagner says. “The existing tower, which was built in the 1950s, is only three stories tall. It’s very, very old and very difficult to operate from.”

The Federal Aviation Administration awarded MEB a \$9 million contract to construct a new tower and a 13,000-square-foot administrative building. “The new 200-foot tower will enable air traffic controllers to see all the taxiways and runways from the tower,” Wagner says. “It’s an unusual project because the tower is very tall. You usually don’t see a lot of high-rise construction outside major cities.”

The groundbreaking took place Sept. 24. “We expect to complete the project in early 2003.”

New focus gives employees more security

MEB has positioned itself to handle all types of commercial, industrial and utility construction projects. “This expanded focus not only ensures the continued success of MEB, it also gives employees a greater sense of security,” Atherton says. “And it gives them the opportunity to learn new skills as they work on a variety of jobs.”



Architectural rendering of the Roanoke Air Traffic Control Tower

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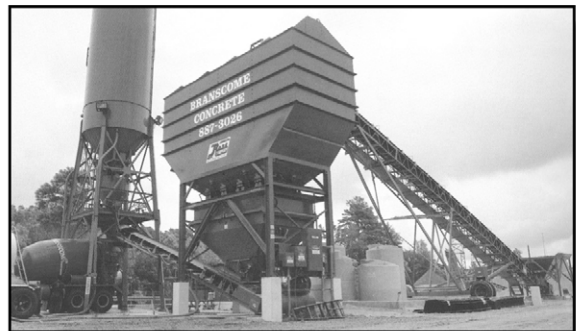
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The MEB management team is as diverse at the projects it builds

Since George B. Clarke IV launched Mid Eastern Builders nearly 20 years ago, he has surrounded himself with bright, capable employees. “We have more than 250 full-time employees. Their personalities, skills and experiences are as diverse as the projects we build,” Clarke says. “And our management team is one of the most progressive in the area.”

The staff’s diversity and individuality have made MEB strong and allowed the company to forge strong relationships with its subcontractors and suppliers. “We are a company with good morals and subs like to work for us,” says Ricky Blowe, vice president. “We have turmoil — every family does — but we have a good blend of personalities and that makes MEB great.”

Finding a niche

Blowe landed in the construction industry by way of farming. He worked on the family farm as a young boy, through high school and while he attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Early in his construction career, he realized that farming and construction require similar skill sets. “Both require knowing how to build, coordinate work, plan creatively and manage people.”

Initially, Blowe went to work for another Hampton Roads contractor. In 1985, Clarke asked him to join the MEB team.

“One of my initial projects was to build MEB’s first corporate office. Since it was in the Cavalier Industrial Park and I live in North Carolina, I made sure the project came in ahead of schedule. It cut my daily commute in half,” Blowe says. “Soon after I secured the company’s North Carolina unlimited building general contractor’s license. That allowed us to expand into North Carolina.”

He’s glad he joined the MEB team. “As I’ve seen the number of employees multiply, I still feel individual contributions matter. To be a member of the MEB team means an exciting career, a heavily challenged workload and a secure future.”

Construction becomes a way of life

Mark Olmstead, vice president, began his construction career at the tender age of 14. “Every summer while in high school and college I worked as a form carpenter, laborer or apprentice brick mason. I also worked for a geo-technical lab testing concrete, steel and earthwork,” he says.

“I graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in environmental science and envisioned a career working for the Environmental Protection Agency or an agency focused on forestry and wildlife.” He soon discovered that “getting away from construction just wasn’t going to happen.”

He credits his “ability to understand the essence of a problem and how to troubleshoot and reach a solution that’s not just one-sided” as the reason for his success. “A solution must work for all parties,” Olmstead says. “I’m able to find the best solution for each situation.”

Learning requires listening

For Mike Dean, operations manager, the route to a career in construction was a little more circuitous. “I have degrees in business admin-



From left to right are David Ervin, vice president/senior project manager; Ricky Blowe, vice president; Mark Olmstead, vice president; George Clarke, president; Tom Atherton, vice president, business development.

istration and business management. I was a cargo movement officer with the Army Transportation Corps during Viet Nam. I spent a short time managing a small town in Southwest Virginia and about 20 years ago I had a small residential contracting firm.”

His diverse background led him to MEB where he oversees the maintenance and whereabouts of the company’s 70 trucks and more than 100 pieces of heavy equipment, including cranes, front-end loaders, excavators and bulldozers.

The staff’s diversity and individuality have made MEB strong and allowed the company to forge strong relationships with its subcontractors and suppliers.

“I also am responsible for estimating the heavy side of the company — underground utilities, bridges and wastewater,” Dean says.

He says the best advice he ever received came from a professor at Virginia Tech. “He was probably calling me down when he said, ‘When you’re talking you’re not learning. There is so much to learn that you should be listening all the time.’ That stuck with me.”

Dean says when he came to MEB 10 years ago the company was small. “It’s grown and I’ve grown. I’ve learned how to be a better manager and how to be part of a team. I’ve learned how to direct a team and how to be a member.”

(Continued on page 20)

The MEB management team (Continued from page 19)



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An interesting opportunity wins out

When Dave Ervin graduated from Virginia Tech with a bachelor's of science degree in building construction, he had offers from "big, glamorous companies." Yet, he accepted MEB's offer. "It was an interesting opportunity," he says. "MEB was just entering the water and wastewater treatment fields. And I liked George's attitude — work hard and play hard."

Ervin says working for MEB has been a good experience. "We went through a few growing pains. We've overcome that and we're poised to expand."

He says one word sums up MEB — satisfaction. "We have satisfied clients and a satisfied workforce. The people who work here — even the guys in the field — know they're appreciated. And the engineers and

"We have satisfied clients and a satisfied workforce.

The people who work here — even the guys in the field — know they're appreciated. And the engineers and clients know we're giving them a great product.

MEB is known as a fair, quality contractor."

— Dave Ervin

clients know we're giving them a great product. MEB is known as a fair, quality contractor."

Ervin says he's encountered a few hurdles during his career with MEB. "There's no formalized training program. You're expected to do your job and work hard. You just need to dive in. George gives you all the latitude and responsibility you need to turn yourself and the company into the best you can be. He gives you as much rope as you can take."

Construction is a family thing

Tom H. Atherton III grew up in the construction industry. "My father is vice president of J.F. Shea Co. Inc., a heavy/tunnel contractor," Atherton says. "I worked during the summers for Shea." His experiences include working as a miner behind the tunnel-boring machines, as a

laborer on bridges and a cut-and-cover tunnel, and as a field engineer on a tunnel project. "I also spent two summers working for a home builder."

After graduating from Virginia Tech with a bachelor's of science degree in building construction, Atherton worked four years for a small building contractor in Northern Virginia. "I then worked three years for Shea in Houston and San Diego before returning to Virginia to work with MEB."

He joined the firm in 1998 as director of business development. "I was hired to develop negotiated, private work for the company," he says. "The first year was a question as to whether it would be fruitful. But after that, it has been much more rewarding."

Says Atherton of his short career, "My experience in both the building and the heavy/utility work has given me the knowledge I need to understand the work MEB does. With that background, I can develop the new business we need."

Atherton says he enjoys marketing. "MEB's quality people make my job a lot easier. Quality people performing quality work are easy to sell."

Love and respect are common threads

While diversity defines MEB, a common thread — love of family — weaves it together.

"I'm a real family-type person," Clarke says. "I love my family. I try to spend lots of time with my wife and kids — kids are what life is all about."

Clarke's management team echoes his sentiment. Dean, who has been married for 36 years, says his wife is his best friend. Olmstead says the perfect day is laughing and running around the house with his two boys, 13 and 2. Blowe says cruising down the Chowan River listening to music with his family and friends is the ideal way to relax.

Ervin and Atherton, college roommates at Tech, cultivated a friendship that now extends to Atherton's family. "It includes my wife, Kendra, and our kids, Hunter and Katie," Atherton says. "Dave is Katie's godfather."

The men also think of their co-workers as family members. "When I'm interviewing people, I tell them that if they come to work for us they're joining a family," Dean says.



This general purpose warehouse, a 140,000-square foot defense distribution depot for the Navy is located at the Norfolk Naval Station.

Project managers bring a wealth of big-company, big-job expertise to MEB

Mid Eastern Builders has had its eye on growth for a number of years. To position the company to go after larger, more complex projects, the executive management has brought in a number of project managers who have big-company, big-job experience.

"We are an attractive company," says George B. Clarke IV, president of MEB. "We've recruited managers from such nationally known companies as Fru-Con Contractors, Centex, J.F. Shea, Mortenson, and Poole and Kent."

Kicking rocks and digging in the dirt feels good

Fred Wagner is one of those recruits. "I worked for Poole and Kent, one of the largest mechanical contractors in the United States, for 13 years as a vice president," Wagner says. "I worked in and around Baltimore doing wastewater pipe work. I also spent seven years in Alaska building hospitals."

Wagner, who graduated in 1983 from the University of Virginia with a degree in chemical engineering, says Clarke anticipated the company's growth very well. "He has hired managers with a good cross section of experience. We run jobs for MEB that are smaller than those we've run in the past for other companies."

And, he adds, "We've worked for premier, national contractors. George is getting the experience of big contractors and pulling it together as a regional contractor. That's an exceptional feat. It positions us well to go after the bigger work, which is our future."

Wagner said he joined the MEB team because it doesn't experience a lot of turnover. "People like working for MEB and for George Clarke. He has lots of charisma."

Wagner said construction is "kind of a family thing." Most of the men in his family work construction. "I like kicking rocks and digging in the dirt with my steel-tipped boots. And I like that my office is on a worksite. It's easy to forget when you're pushing papers at the main office that guys are in the field hammering nails. It allows me to pay more attention to them."

Northern Virginia was a good training ground

After graduating from Norfolk State University in 1988 with a degree in building construction technology, Stefon Artis, a Suffolk native, went to work for Centex, a large Fairfax-based construction company. "I worked as an office engineer on large-scale projects — a \$46 million penitentiary, a \$24 million high school in Virginia Beach, a \$170 million hospital and a \$60 million regional jail," he says. "I bounced around with the company for 10 years. I was always on the move. We chased bigger projects that don't just pop up around your neighborhood."

Artis yearned to settle down. "The best advice I ever received was to put your family first. If you don't have a family, you have no reason to work." He wanted to buy a house. "But I never knew what or where the future would be."

He doesn't regret the time he spent with the large corporation. "I am where I am today because I went to Northern Virginia and got lots of experience. That put me in a good position."

The opportunity to fish and spend time with his family and friends lured him to MEB. "The company offered the stability I wanted and needed."



Managers gather weekly to discuss upcoming bids and current projects.

MEB taps into a mechanical contractor's experiences

Clarke has the savvy to spot talent, and he saw talent in Briton J. Schwartz. "I was ready for a change," Schwartz says. "I had accepted a position with another general contractor when word made its way to George that I was leaving my old job," Schwartz says. "He asked me to come and talk a bit before I went to the competition."

Schwartz, who grew up in Hampton, graduated from Old Dominion University in 1992. He interviewed only with local companies. "I wanted to stay in this area. Generally, working for larger firms means you're moving from job to job. I wasn't interested in a lot of traveling," he says.

"We've recruited managers from such nationally known companies as Fru-Con Contractors, Centex, J.F. Shea, Mortenson, and Poole and Kent."

—George B. Clarke

His stint as a project manager for the Chesapeake-based Hampton Roads Mechanical involved estimating and managing mechanical projects for plumbing, heating, air conditioning and ventilation systems, as well as process and industrial piping systems. "I worked as the mechanical subcontractor with MEB on many projects prior to my coming here to work," Schwartz says. "George knew me and my abilities."

And Clarke was looking for another project manager. "George felt as if he needed someone with a little more experience with mechanical issues. There was a little bit of a hole there I could fill." So Schwartz made the move to MEB.

(Continued on page 23)



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Project managers (Continued from page 21)

He says, “I primarily work on water and wastewater treatment projects. I do mechanical estimating and I’ve built numerous pump station projects.” Current projects include the Hampton Roads Sanitation District’s odor control improvements, the Gloucester County reverse osmosis water treatment plant and replacing fuel storage tanks in Cherry Point, N.C.

“I’m involved with a lot of MEB’s mechanical aspects; I understand what’s going on when other mechanical contractors give us quotes. I fall back on my experiences a lot — now I see things from a different perspective,” Schwartz says.

Hampton Roads is the final stop

From cost control and quality control to cogeneration plants and steam turbine generators, Brian L. Williams brought 15-plus years of experience to MEB when he joined the firm three years ago. “I was a project engineer with one of the nation’s top 100 contractors,” he says. “Fru-Con is part of B+B out of Germany, and projects I worked on often exceeded \$100 million.”

Williams executed contracts, managed sites, directed plant operations, worked with steam generators and served as a quality control manager and as a loss control manager. “I did everything from outage and shutdown work to design/build.”

New challenges and the dynamics of construction fascinate him. “Construction is in my blood. My father worked in the construction industry for 40 years. For as long as I can remember, it just seemed the natural thing for me to do,” Williams says.

Williams studied at Penn State and Marshall University. “I understood the nuts and bolts of construction. I wanted to master the administrative aspects of it.” He also wanted more autonomy and more challenges.

He found what he was looking for while constructing a \$19 million pump station for the city of Norfolk. “I was the project engineer. In addition to the standard company responsibilities, I was assigned to start up and commission the plant for its turnover to the owner,” he says.

A subcontractor with whom he had developed a friendship introduced him to Clarke. “MEB seemed like the opportunity for which I was looking,” Williams says. “George hired me in September 1998 and I relish the professional growth. Every day is something new.”

“A company can have all the equipment and the money in the world, but without good people it won’t prosper,” Clarke says. “Our biggest asset is our people.”



Shop and equipment manager Buddy Curran poses with small tools equipment manager Dave Parker.

A dedicated administrative staff keeps the work flowing smoothly



David Ervin and his admin, Elizabeth Michaels, go over drawings for a current project.

To manage the details and paperwork required to keep so many projects running smoothly, Mid Eastern Builders relies on its dedicated administrative team. Out of more than 35-plus office personnel, nearly half are “admins” that make sure change orders are processed, contracts are signed, bills are paid and calls are answered. Making up this support team are eight administrative assistants who support project management, estimating and business development; five accounting personnel

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who handle day-to-day financial obligations, as well as human resource and payroll functions; a receptionist; and an employee who spends most of her time on the road.

Teamwork is essential, and everyone pitches in to make sure that deadlines are met and paperwork doesn’t delay a job. With the company’s growth, the once rather-small project list has grown so that the coordination between the field and the office is crucial.

All agree that working for MEB is challenging yet fun. It’s more than just collecting a paycheck — it is rewarding.

Safety is a top priority

Safety is a top priority at Mid Eastern Builders. To keep its employees safe, the company holds Tool Box Talks — weekly safety meetings — and offers such diverse training programs as accident investigation, first aid and forklift training.

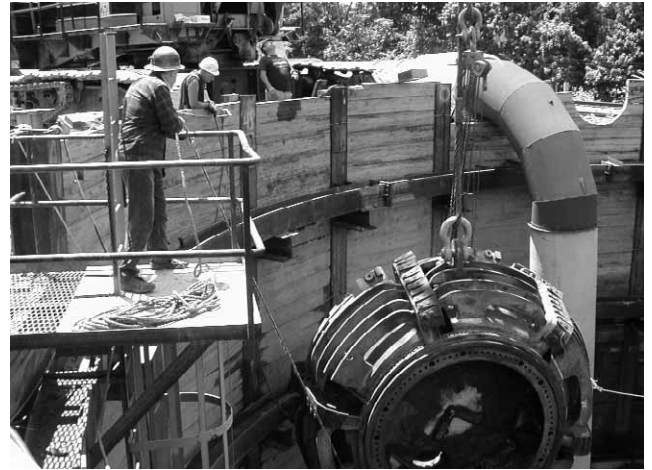
Leading the way to a safe shop is James McRoy, director of corporate safety, and his staff. “When I started working with MEB in January 1998, a safety program was in place. But the company had grown. It had acquired larger, more complex jobs and it needed to upgrade its safety program.”

McRoy’s mission became four-fold: Disseminate safety information to all MEB employees, teach employees and managers the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s safety regulations, survey and inspect job sites, and manage all injury claims.

“The first thing I did was put together a safety process manual. I looked at the company’s previous safety records, its OSHA certificates and insurance claims. I analyzed the type of work the company performs and developed a comprehensive safety program.”

Part of the safety program includes offering OSHA’s 10-hour Construction Safety course, which covers such compliance standards as fall protection, steel erection, electrical safety and excavation. “We’ve certified most of MEB’s superintendents and project managers,” McRoy says.

Has the upgraded safety program been effective? “Yes,” McRoy says emphatically. “It has done a lot to increase the employees’ knowledge of safety issues. From a behavioral standpoint, we’ve seen fewer accidents. From a monetary standpoint, our incurred costs have decreased.”



MEB/Shea employees exercise caution while lowering part of the tunnel-boring machine into a deep shaft at the CSO project in Richmond.

McRoy, who is president of the Tidewater Chapter of the American Society of Safety Engineers and holds a master’s degree from George Washington University, says he is most excited about the company’s eagerness to improve its safety performance. “Construction sites offer challenging safety environments, as conditions and regulations change constantly. The ultimate goal is a positive safety record, and it’s improving.”



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MEB's employees embark on a charitable crusade

Unlike the Robin Hood who lived in England during the 12th century, the Robin Hoods of Hampton Roads do not steal from corrupt officials who abuse their power over an oppressed peasantry.

"But we do take from the rich and give to the poor," says Mark Olmstead, vice president of Mid Eastern Builders and member of the Robin Hoods of Virginia Beach.

Instead of cavorting through Sherwood Forest poaching the king's deer and outwitting the evil Sheriff of Nottingham, the modern-day Robin Hoods throw lavish parties. "The proceeds — almost every cent — go to children," Olmstead says. "We have no overhead — not one dollar — and we have no restrictions on how the money is spent."

Tom Atherton III, vice president of business development, says MEB is extremely benevolent. "From the Rotary to the Shriners to Virginia Tech, MEB is involved in the community. We procure most of our work from Hampton Roads. To show our support for a community that has been generous to us, we donate our time, our talents and our money to support many local charities."

"From the Rotary to the Shriners to Virginia Tech, MEB is involved in the community and in generously contributing to charitable organizations. We procure most of our work from Hampton Roads. To show our support for a community that has been generous to us, we donate our time, our talents and our money to support many local charities."

— Tom Atherton

In lieu of giving gifts to each other during the winter holidays, the employees pool their money and donate the funds to a charity. "Last year we donated the money to H.E.R.," says Terri Harris, assistant to MEB President George B. Clarke IV. "They were so tickled. And the best part was that the employees just opened their wallets. It wasn't like pulling teeth to get the donations."

When the Virginia Zoological Park was raising funds for its new African Okavango Delta Exhibit, MEB did not hesitate.

MEB's kids enjoy cotton candy and a magic show at a recent event.



MEB employees, family and friends gather at the Duck Inn.

"A major contributor agreed to match all donations once the zoo had raised a certain amount of money. Time was running out and still there was a sizeable gap. George didn't hesitate when he learned about it. He donated the difference," Atherton says.

"George is very generous," Harris says. "No matter what the need, MEB is there to help."

Education is important to Clarke. "We also help fund a scholarship through the Tidewater District of the Association General Contractors for people who intend to pursue careers in the construction industry."

Clarke says two of his favorite nonprofit organizations are the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia and the Samaritan House. "My wife serves on the board of the Samaritan House," Clarke says. "We do a lot of charity fund-raisers for both groups."

One popular fund-raiser is aboard the Clarkes' boat. "We donate evening cruises to several organizations. The organizations then auction the evenings as fund-raisers," he says.

Atherton says MEB encourages its employees to volunteer. "We participated in Meals on Wheels, Clean the Bay Day and Paint Your Heart Out." Meals on Wheels delivers meals to needy families, Clean the Bay Day helps preserve one of our natural resources, and Paint Your Heart Out spruces up the homes of the elderly and physically challenged.

"MEB is supportive of the time I donate to area charities. I am the co-chair of Clean the Bay Day and I serve on the board of directors for the Great Bridge Rotary Club," Atherton says. One of its major fund-raisers takes place during Tidewater Builders Association's annual Homearama.

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"We raise money by picking up trash at Homearama," Atherton says. Each Rotary member signs up for four four-hour shifts during the three-week event. "TBA pays us. They get a discount and we give sweat labor."

Although picking up trash is not as much fun as throwing lavish parties, Atherton says the merry members are on a crusade similar to that of the Robin Hoods — helping children. "The money we raise supports both the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, as well as numerous other charities."



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