

THE POWER OF REPUTATION

Three decades of excellence make
Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc.
the go-to for Los Angeles health care construction

by Greg Lynch



Knowing when to speak up can *change everything*.

For Vic Braden, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of *Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc.* (Cornerstone), speaking up and joining a conversation more than 40 years ago put him on the path to starting Cornerstone. Founded in 1985 and specializing in health care and hospital construction, Cornerstone has long been a fixture in Los Angeles commercial construction.

"I spent six years in the Navy during Vietnam," Vic explains. "I'd saved all my money while I was in the service, and when I was discharged, I decided to get an apartment by the beach, just surf and have fun for a year. Not long after, my sister was having a baby at a hospital in Long Beach. I went

to visit her and was sitting in the waiting room. A couple of guys walked by talking, and I introduced myself. One of the guys was talking about the trouble he was having filling a job at the hospital's physical plant. I told him I knew boilers and power plants from my time in the Navy and was offered a job right then. I just sort of fell into the chief engineer's job at the plant, and the rest is history."

He went on to serve as chief engineer and director of facilities and construction at a couple of large medical centers in Southern California. "I saw the need for a construction company that understood the specific needs of medical centers," he says. "When I founded Cornerstone along with my wife, Linda, in 1985, I already had a lot of contacts at other hospitals, people I knew professionally. It was a



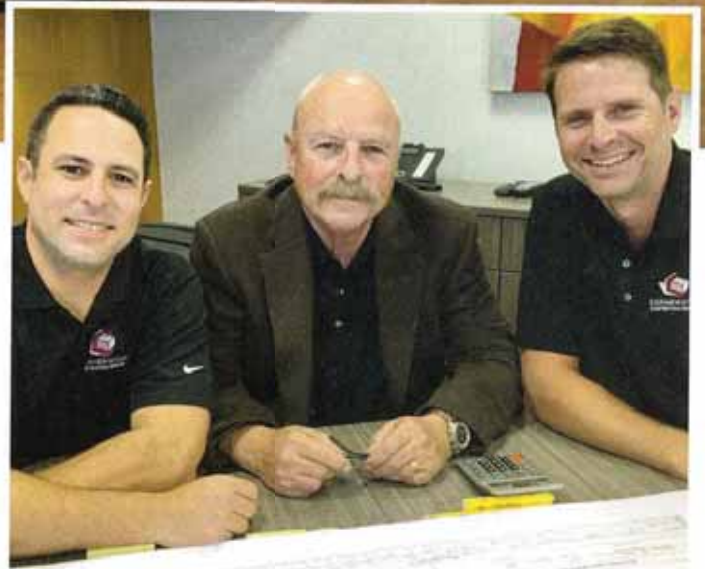
Site prep and replacement of a new linear accelerator for the Providence Del Amo Diagnostic Center included a new vault door as well as structural, mechanical, electrical and plumbing upgrades.

built-in marketplace. I hit the ground running and always had jobs available."

RIDING THE WAVES

Over the years, Vic has seen the highs and the lows of the industry. Like many other construction companies, Cornerstone started in its owner's garage. A few quick jobs later, he brought in two employees. By his second year in business, he had 10 employees and was looking for an office space.

"My first year, our total sales were around \$500,000," Vic says. "I'd been active in the California Society for Healthcare Engineering and knew most of the state's hospital directors through that organization. It was a great



Vic Braden, Executive Vice President and COO of Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc. (center), reviews plans for a new project with his son V.J., Vice President of Project Management (left) and John Panagetopoulos, project manager/estimating.



Centinela Hospital Medical Center's Department of Nuclear Medicine turned to Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc. to handle site prep, utilities (electrical/HVAC) and the build-out of this space for the radiology unit, including installing diagnostic equipment.

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Vic Braden, Executive Vice President and COO,
Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc.

source of work, but they didn't want to risk giving me real big projects when I was just getting started. Our second year, we brought in \$1.2 million, then \$3 million the next year and \$6 million in our fourth. By then I was up to 40 employees and had a large shop in Torrance.”

In 1990, the economy went into a recession, and work was more difficult to find. He had to trim the size of his operations, moving the office back to his house and shedding some of his employees, becoming, in his words, “lean and mean.” Still, hospitals are more recession-proof than most businesses.

“We did about half our volume that year (1990), but still made a profit,” Vic says. “I learned not to grow too fast, to know our place in the market. I learned which jobs to go after, and which would be a good fit for us. Back then, a big job was \$50,000. Now it’s \$5 million.”

STAYING HEALTHY

While specializing in health care has provided Cornerstone a niche market in which to excel, it’s a market that has its share of challenges.

“I spoke with someone in the industry in San Francisco who said he believes the medical industry is more regulated than the nuclear industry,” Vic jokes. “There are lots of codes, inspections and regulations to consider that are specific to the industry.”

Cornerstone employees undergo extensive training to meet those specific requirements, including infection control and interim life safety training—both important when working in patient care areas. Cornerstone



The Irvine Regional Medical Center's cardiac surgery catheterization lab project was fast-tracked through an integrated project delivery approach. The project was completed while keeping the surgery space operational, as the area was sealed off from the rest of the hospital.

also has membership in the American Society for Health Care Engineering, the California Society for Healthcare Engineering, the National Fire Protection Association and the *Construction Specifications Institute*.

After more than 30 years in business, whether the economy is boom or bust, Vic believes success is something you make, based on the quality of your work and the value you deliver to customers. It's a philosophy shared by Cornerstone employees.

REPUTATION IS KEY

"You have to have the mindset you're going to do the best possible job for your customers and give them the quality and effort they deserve," Vic says. "We say quality is never an accident. We believe we bring extra value to the table for our customers. Reputation is everything in this business. You'll get one rapidly, whether you're good or bad. Once you have a good reputation, your job is to protect it. Do things right and continue to do things right."

Vic recalls a job that Cornerstone did years ago for a major hospital in Irvine. The chief of staff had seen a



Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc. constructed the East Tower diagnostic imaging center at the Fountain Valley Medical Center.

new open-heart surgery machine and wanted it for the hospital. It was a large piece of machinery that couldn't come through the hospital's doors, especially with the surgical center on the second floor.

"When they came to us about renovating the surgical center, we weren't sure how it could be done, even working at night," Vic says. "We worked on some plans and came to them with an idea to get around the problems. We rigged a scaffold from the loading dock to the second floor, which would still allow the trucks to use the dock. We removed



Cornerstone Construction Group, Inc. handled the complete interior and exterior tenant improvement of this 5,000-square-foot locked unit at The Providence Center's Crisis Stabilization Unit.

"We're stable. We've been here for years and we're not going anywhere. Show stability in this industry, and it's good for you and good for your customers."

Vic Braden

three windows, punched through into the surgical room and put in a temporary construction elevator. We isolated the workspace from the rest of surgery and brought everything and everyone in and out through that window. We still had to do the work on nights and weekends to accommodate the hospital, but we completed the project in less than four months. They were ecstatic. After that, when they called us, they no longer asked how much, they just asked when we were available. That's the kind of reputation you want."

CRITICAL CARE

The Los Angeles area has no shortage of hospitals, which in turn have no shortage of work for a company like Cornerstone. Given the work available and the company's reputation,

Cornerstone rarely has to go far from its Redondo Beach office for a project. Typically, the company's work is in Los Angeles County, Orange County or the Inland Empire.

"We've gone as far as San Luis Obispo for a job before," Vic says. "But it has to be the right fit and the right project. Typically, it has to be a highly sophisticated and specialized job to bring us that far. Something like installing a new MRI or CT scan facility, or a new neonatal unit."

Over the years, Cornerstone has done work for most of the hospitals in the area, and its largest client owns seven hospitals in Southern California. Cornerstone is an approved contractor for this group, a status achieved through a heavy vetting process.

"We like to diversify," Vic says. "We don't want to be too reliant on one client. We've had to learn to say no to the jobs that aren't a good fit for us."

After more than three decades at the helm, Vic is getting ready to hand control of the business over to his son, V.J.

"V.J. runs the day-to-day right now with all the project managers and superintendents," Vic says. "He grew up in the business, then went off to college. He did his own thing for a while, then decided to come back to us."

Looking at all he's built and accomplished over 33 years of running Cornerstone, Vic is justifiably proud of his family, his company and his employees.

"We had a saying in the service: God, Country, Family," Vic says. "The name 'Cornerstone' was chosen because I saw it in the Book of Isaiah. No building can be built without one. I'm proud of that. I think our company honors and serves God and country. Since we're a family corporation, our employees have a sense of being a part of a team."

That team includes longtime employees with a vast background of experience. "God, Country, Family are the values we put out there," Vic says. "We're stable. We've been here for years and we're not going anywhere. Show stability in this industry, and it's good for you and good for your customers." 🍷

Greg Lynch is a mystery. With a background in journalism and private investigations, his first novel, "Plain Brown Wrapper," was published in 2016.