



The Magical Side of Construction

Do you ever wonder who brings theme parks to life? As a Florida native, theme parks are a favorite pastime and I had the opportunity to speak with Julie Holmes, owner and president of [JK2 Scenic](#), a company that adds a touch of magic to parks such as Universal Orlando. From creating faux cocoa beans and butterbeer to moving gears and pipework, Julie and her team show a magical side of construction.



Join us as Julie shares how she got started in the industry, different projects she's been part of and more.

RB: Tell us a little a bit about how you got started in the construction industry.



JH: Since I can remember, I've always been around construction. My father has been in the industry my entire life. One of his first projects was building his first home, a two-story house that my parents still live in today. He decided he loved construction, got his master's in building construction and got experience working for a few larger general contractors. In 1987, he started his own company.

There's so many career paths that anyone could choose to do in life and I was lucky enough to be exposed to construction. Even so, I admit that I was one of those academics that thought I wanted to be a doctor. I was going to University of Florida and actually through my third year and decided I no longer wanted to be a doctor.

My dad and I were brain storming and he suggested civil engineering since I was always good at math. I honestly had no idea what that even meant but was willing to give it a try. It was part of the process of construction, if not exactly building but rather one of the drawings that people build off of. I got my civil engineering degree and worked for a large civil engineering firm



right out school for about eight years. In 2010, I went to work for my second engineering firm, and it included a bit of architecture as well which was interesting, to learn more about floor plan and building planning.



After I had been there about three years, my father, in his effort to do a bit of exit strategy planning, approached me about coming to work for the family business.

RB: And that was JK2?

JH: Yes, the company is JK2. He was trying to figure out who was going to take over the company and I never in a million years thought I'd be back home working in the business. In 2013, we had business meetings and talked about what it would look like if I came to work in the company.

Although I didn't want to move home as I was in Atlanta at the time, I knew if I didn't take the job, I'd regret it. I'd regret not working with my father and trying something new and outside the box. So I moved back to my hometown of Apopka, Florida and started working in the family business.

RB: How did Scenic figure into what you wanted to do at JK2?

JH: When I joined the company in 2013, I was part of JK2 on the construction side and ended up running one job. I was on time, on budget and I had a successful project and team but realized I'd rather work on the creative side, which is Scenic.



The Scenic division was started in 2008, and although we had been working with the theme parks, the parts that are visible to the guests are always themed. Before starting Scenic, we would hire out the finishing touches, the wow factor that makes that space come to life, to finishing craftsmen, the carpenters, artists and theme painters. Our project manager had experience with theming and said why don't we try doing it ourselves?

We got our first job, a small ticket booth for Halloween Horror Nights. Right after that, we were awarded work in the Wizarding World of Harry Potter™, such as Dumbledore's desk and chair and the Mirror of Erised, which we've actually built four times — Orlando, Hollywood, Japan and now China.

I started working with Tim Bartell, who was the project manager that convinced my father to invest in the Scenic division. We're great partners; he has the creative brain to problem solve these crazy ideas we're presented with and I bring the business aspect.

When I became the vice president of the Scenic division, we slowly began growing clients and staff, investing in equipment, and getting processes and procedures down. I think in the first year, from 2013 to 2014, we quadrupled our business. We then doubled it again, so in a four-year span, we've had almost 1000 percent growth. I look back and it's been crazy! In 2013, we had eight employees and today, we have 28. A little rollercoaster of a ride but definitely fun!



It was always a strategy that if I was truly working in the business, running it and doing the day-to-day, we would make it a woman-owned business. That remained true to our initial thoughts and we're finally making it a reality now with Scenic being a stand-alone company.

RB: Those are fantastic numbers! Do you have any best practices you'd like to share surrounding those metrics?

JH: It's really finding out who you are. We realized we want to do the wow factor. We want cool projects that are more difficult, that are challenging, that require us to use our resources, creative brain and talents. Once you have a focus and know where you want to take the business, it makes it easier to pick and choose, and we try to be very specific with the jobs we take on.

RB: Do you have a favorite project that you've worked on so far?



JH: There's so many! One of the cooler ones we just did was Universal's Volcano Bay™ water park, which recently opened. We worked on every single piece of wood that was interior to a building; I think there were 25 plus buildings on the project. That was pretty cool to see that come together because it was one of our largest projects to date revenue-wise.

Probably second to that was the Toothsome

Chocolate Emporium & Savory Feast Kitchen at Universal CityWalk. We did all the interior theming and pipework so when you walk in, you see flashing casework and moving gears and a bean spinner. We actually had to fabricate faux cocoa beans that spin above the ice cream stand. It was a really cool project too because it's one of their most popular restaurants and we get to say that we did all the interior work on the first floor.



We also sometimes get to do theming work that you might not expect, such as in retail stores. Theme parks and attractions want to keep the magic going even when guests are shopping, and we've worked with Universal Orlando and at Disney Springs to do that, even in one of the largest retail stores in the world. Another fun and unique retail challenge was at Marcus Jordan's Trophy Room at Disney Springs. We created a custom shoe display that allowed the shoes to levitate and spin.

RB: I found it very interesting to see theming under the construction umbrella, and it's something that I don't think a lot of people may think about.

JH: Yes, and that's the thing. You don't know unless you're exposed to it. Do you wonder who makes those wands or butterbeer? We have worked on so many different fun and creative projects within the theme parks.

But you'd never know what company built it or what skills they may be hiring for. That's something that's very unique about our growth, we don't discriminate by any means. We've had father/daughter, father/son teams, very tenured employees and very young with no experience. Some of our best hires have been people who just have the drive and willingness to learn. Some of them have a hobby and they like painting but they've never learned how to spray in a spray booth or painting techniques to get the different kind of finishes. That's one of the things that sets us apart. We're willing to invest in people who fit our core values and have the willingness to learn.

