

# The Puerto Rican Connection

**Renny Huntley  
Builds a  
Thriving  
Business and  
Introduces EIFS  
to the  
Commonwealth**

**By Michael Major**



*Renny and Maria Huntley at the AWCI Annual Convention in March 1994.*

**H**ow does a fellow from St. Louis, MO., end up building a plastering business in Puerto Rico?

As in any story, it's best to start at the beginning.

Harold "Renny" Huntley is in the third generation of his family's plastering business. His grandfather, Homer P. Huntley, passed on the legacy to his two sons, Renny's father Josiah, and his brother Orville. The two brothers developed a large plastering/lathing business in

St. Louis, which expanded to a number of other cities, including Dallas and Washington, D.C.

In the mid-1950s they were invited to bid on a project in Puerto Rico. This was the time of "operation bootstrap," when large amounts of money were being invested in the area, creating many opportunities for industry.

"My father saw a tremendous opportunity," Huntley says. "For everything was done in block concrete or cement plaster. Nobody

knew about plastering with hawks and trowels, or especially the pumping of cement plaster mixes."

**I**n 1957, when Huntley was 9, he moved to Puerto Rico with his parents. He grew up working weekends and summers in the business then called Josiah Dale Huntley & Company.

After getting his college degree from Texas Lutheran College, he joined his father as a partner, and then, when his father passed away in

1978, changed the name to JDH, Inc. The company is based in San Juan.

## Changing With The Times

Originally, the company's focus was on plastering and lathing. But in the early 1970s, for economic and efficiency reasons, there was a movement among builders and contractors to limit the number of subcontractors. So, the Huntleys then expanded to get into as many different types of finishing work as possible, including acoustics, drywall, gypsum, ceramic tile, vinyl composition, tile wall coverings, paintings and other finishing.

In 1971, Dryvit Systems introduced its exterior insulation and finish systems at a convention of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International. "We became very enthusiastic about it," Huntley recalls. "When Frank Morsilli came down, he was the only person in the booth, dressed in his suit and tie working the hawk and trowel. He was very impressive." Morsilli returned three weeks later and spent several days at Huntley's house, helping to put up samples there.

Unfortunately, however, the first attempts to introduce EIFS to Puerto Rico didn't take. "We worked very hard to introduce the product, but builders are very conservative here and very price-conscious. Cement plaster was so much cheaper, so nobody was interested."

Around 1980, however, Huntley began getting inquiries from designers and architects about EIFS, so he renewed his efforts. Morsilli and other Dryvit personnel cooperated, trying three different distributors before sending one of their own permanent representatives to stay. "There were continual efforts to bring EIFS to the forefront of building owners, designers and architects," Huntley says. In the mid-1980s we started to get major jobs specified and built with EIFS."

Once word began to get around, EIFS sales began to increase. "EIFS is very appropriate for the climate here, which is characterized by a lot of rain, high humidity and a very hot sun that can be very tough on any coating. EIFS provides the insulation but does not crack." EIFS has grown from zero to now between 35 percent and 40 percent of Huntley's work, with gypsum, acoustics and interior finishing comprising about 45 percent, with the remaining percentage being comprised of exterior framing and finishing.

"EIFS is definitely what we're known for," Huntley says.

"We've stayed on the cutting edge of new technology and new products, and that, along with our reputation for getting the job done on time, has kept us ahead of the pack." JDH's annual volume is about \$2 million.

## Different Environment

What's it like doing business on a tropical island as opposed to the mainland?

Huntley explains that there are both similarities and differences. Much of this is occasioned by the somewhat unusual status of a commonwealth nation. It has some trapping of independence, as in certain federal controls by Congress. The commonwealth status is good for a developing country, Huntley says, because it provides flexibility. But he predicts that in 10 to 30 years, as the island's economy fully matures, there will be more of a drive toward statehood. In recent elections, very few Puerto Ricans opted for total independence, while the majority still favored the commonwealth over the state status.

"The laid-back way of doing business that was still around in the 1950s has definitely changed," Huntley says. "Now the pressure and pace is the same as in any major U.S. city."

When the Huntleys first arrived, it was the start of an economic revolution. There were not even grocery stores. Now there are large

chains like Kmart and Wal-Mart slugging it out for market share. Condominiums did not exist at the time, but now there are high rises. At one time up to 90 percent of U.S. pharmaceutical companies had facilities on the island. Puerto Rico has become very cosmopolitan with a corresponding increase in crime and a decline in family values, though family is still a strong force.

Huntley estimates that 60 percent of the residents speak English reasonably well, 30 percent can get by and 10 percent have difficulty. But Puerto Rico is still primarily a Spanish-speaking country, rooted in a culture different from the mainland. Huntley speaks Spanish and has relied primarily on training residents rather than bringing workers in from the states. Huntley believes that due to the weakness of trade unions in the States and lack of

them in Puerto Rico, one of the main challenges to the industry is finding ways to induce qualified people into the industry and to train them.

Being an island means that much of the economy depends on importing raw materials from abroad and then exporting the finished products, which is a situation different from most inter-state trade. The fact that the island is only about 100 miles long and 40 miles wide means there is only a very small regional market, which has led Huntley to diversity and to finding his niche through specializing in higher quality and higher profit work.

### **Time for Family**

Huntley works long hours, from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday, as well as on Saturdays--except during football season. His

hobby is Pee Wee Football, for boys age 8 to 16. He's been a coach for 16 years, a member of the board of directors and this year president of the league.

His wife, Maria, was born of a Puerto Rican mother and English father. She is an avid kayaker and master swimmer. Their son, Richard, 16, plays high school football and has represented Puerto Rico several times in water polo. Their daughter, Tanya, 14, swims for the national teenage swim team.

When asked whether he ever had any thoughts of returning to the states, Huntley replies, "No, I love it here." *CD*

### **About the Author**

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