

Beam by beam, rebar by rebar, Foundation Steel builds enviable reputation

Everybody knows about the tortoise and the hare, and the reassuring moral of their race: Slow and steady wins. But replace the two competing animals with a more realistic model — dozens of canny businesses vying for a place in the winner's circle — and slow/steady begins to sound quaint if not downright unprofitable.

Charlotte Dymarkowski, President of Foundation Steel, is here to say otherwise. Her slow, steady and eyes-on-excellence approach built the Swanton-headquartered company into one of the region's most respected structural steel fabricator and installers. With a staff numbering around 200, the company's many projects include interstate bridges, the Henry Ford Cancer Center in Detroit, and the aerospace control alert shelter for the 180th Fighter Wing.

Not at all tortoise-like in personality, Charlotte impresses with her directness and determination. Her account of the company's birth is as straightforward as she is: "I said to my husband, 'Hey, why don't I start a company?' My background was business, but not construction. He thought it was kind of a crazy idea, but he supported me.

"So I founded the company in 2008 from scratch, with no employees. I hired my first employee in 2011 — it took that time to set up and to get to know the construction players in the area."

Initially Foundation Steel was run out of the family home, with workers using the garage to fabricate reinforced steel. Operations moved to Swanton some three years later, followed by an expansion into a larger building.

She keeps a special place in her heart for Maumee-based Mosser Construction Inc. "They were the first ones to give us a subcontract job," she recalls. "They asked if I was sure we'd be able to manage the job and I said Yes." It was the beginning of a long and fruitful business relationship. Among many testimonials are the words of a senior project manager with Mosser: "Foundation Steel is a trusted partner who consistently contributes to our shared success."

As for the challenge of being a woman president in a field dominated by men, she allows herself a short laugh. "Yes, it's been a challenge, especially because people — especially some competitors — thought we would fail. It's been fun to prove them all wrong."

Strongly faith-based, she pulls back from any hint of boasting, adding, "After all, we're all just one job away from failing! But I don't focus on that possibility — I focus on doing the right thing. We're going to run our business and leave all the noise behind."

As Foundation Steel moves forward, Charlotte puts her faith into the company's daily realities — even into planning for the future. "I'm the kind of person who does some planning, but I have a very strong faith," she says. "In the beginning I could never have hoped for what we are now, so I would have shot short in planning. I just want to be obedient in the moment and do what I do.

"It's all about getting the right people in the right places, treating people right. We have a great team."

Indeed, a crucial part of Foundation's mission statement reads: "At Foundation we regard our employees as the heartbeat of our organization and our most important asset. We cherish them and devote ourselves, time and money to ensure our employees are respected, trained, mentored, challenged, professional, equipped and appreciated."

Two years ago, the company was certified by the American Institute of Steel Construction — at that time the only construction company within 100 miles with the AISC designation. It's part of the constant quest for improvement, Charlotte says: "It's great to have the initials, but even better is how it's helped us become better. Constant improvement is the only way to keep a market share."

Her vision of the company's future is just as strongly cemented in betterment. "The short-term future is just to keep getting better, then see if there's another market to tackle, follow some natural progressions," she says. "COVID-19 didn't affect construction as much as it did other industries, but we

still took a hit. What's fortunate that even though some projects have been delayed, they're still on the books."

Questions about the longer future she's leaving to themselves, at least for the moment. Her son Danny serves both as vice president and as manager of the Reinforcing Division, and Charlotte at 53 isn't thinking "exactly" about retirement, but she doesn't reject the word. After all, there are still vistas to explore, improvements to make — one is more involvement in the Family Business Center, she says. "Both my son and son-in-law belong to affinity groups, and I want to get back into one as well."

The University of Toledo, though, is never far from her thoughts, given another family connection. "My father, John Stoepler, was dean of the College of Law, and I'm also very involved with the Human Trafficking and Social Justice Institute.

"The University is near and dear to my heart."

Then it's time for this very successful tortoise to race off to another meeting. She leaves a strong impression that whatever the race, she intends to win.