



HARD WORK & CRAFTSMANSHIP

Staying Aloft

PROFILE: BLAIR CUNNINGS

By Michelle Gardner

*Barrier Specialty
Roofing and Coatings'
Blair Cummings combines
flying and a family-feel
work atmosphere to keep
his sprayed foam and
coatings business soaring.*

Funny how life doesn't always turn out the way you think it would. Blair Cummings, CEO of Barrier Specialty Roofing and Coatings in Fresno, California, should be out playing professional golf and designing golf courses.

As a fourth generation coatings contractor, whose grandfather and great-grandfather started a Fresno-based coatings business in 1954, Cummings initially had no plans to continue in the family business. He headed south to the University of Southern California (USC), played golf for the university, and majored in urban planning and development with the hope of designing golf courses one day.

"Unfortunately, when I came out of school, it was at the absolute worst time to be in golf course development," he recalls. "I did real estate and for about six months, chased the Nike Golf Tour to try and qualify as a professional golfer. I decided I wasn't good enough, but no regrets though. After that, I went to work in the family business, which at that time had just started a polyurethane



foam roofing division that I ran for five years. In 1998, I left to begin Barrier Specialty."

What's In A Name?

Cummings remembers that when he left the family business to start his own, he needed to have a company name. Problem was, to avoid confusion, it couldn't be anything with "Cummings" in it. That was the name of the family business, also located in Fresno.

"My wife and I tried to think of a name," he says. "We wanted it to be near the front of the alphabet and we thought about, 'Putting a barrier between you and the weather.' So, Barrier Specialty Roofing became the name."

In talking with Cummings, you find that he is an efficient businessman. So much so, his 30-second elevator pitch

lasts 10 seconds. "We are a specialty roofing company that does all types of coatings," he says. "Polyurethane foam is our bread and butter."

Look, Up In The Sky

Can you mix business with pleasure? Cummings can. He combines his love of flying his 2000 Piper Malibu/Mirage JetPROP with meeting clients and assessing projects up and down the state of California. He says about 80 percent of the company's jobs are out of his area as competition is pretty stiff around Fresno.

"Right now, we have jobs in Sunnydale, San Diego, and Redding," Cummings explains. "What's great about our business is that I can fly to many different areas faster than driving."

Cummings notes the similarity between piloting a plane and piloting a business.

"Being a pilot, you always need to stay ahead of the plane. Staying ahead of the business is important as well, so you are not just reacting to everything."

He continues, "When I started, I wanted to empower people and have a family atmosphere," he says. "We have a very low turnover as a result. The one guy that I started the business with is still with me and many of my employees have been with me for a number of years."

Challenges And Perks

What is different today for Cummings from when he started his business eight years ago is he's doing bigger projects that require different types of labor than when he was working in his family's coatings company.

One of those bigger projects for Barrier Specialty Roofing involved two domed helicopter hangars in Coronado Harbor in San Diego. "We did two domed hangars, 140 feet off the ground, and some points were completely vertical," Cunnings recalls. "I did a ton of ground-work and learned a lot in the field to coordinate everything. We didn't want to hit the million dollar helicopters with overspray."

This job has opened the door to more non-standard jobs, which Cunnings enjoys. "You get to use your mind and bring products to the table that architects may or may not know about, and I like that aspect."

Accentuate The Positive

Noting that things don't always go as planned, Cunnings says that staying positive is a big challenge. "If you're not positive, it's bad because things don't always turn out," he says. "If you own your own business, you can't blame other people for your problems. It stops here."

His memberships in the National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA), Spray Polyurethane Foam Association (SPFA), and the Better Business Bureau (BBB) provide some sanity in his hectic schedule.

"Being a member of various associations helps me mentally," he admits. "I was in real estate and brought a real estate mentality to my business — cold calling and going out after business. Once you get the business, make sure to take care of the customer and always get referrals."

Cunnings says that as 80 percent of his business is out of area, much of it is gained from networking and referrals.

Growth Spurt

Over the last seven years, Barrier Specialty Roofing has grown from five employees to 67. What's remarkable is that just within the last two years, they got to 67 by tripling the number of employees.

So does this growth keep Cunnings awake at night?

"It's hard not taking things on but now we can pretty much pick and

choose, which is nice," he says. "I'm a pretty high-energy guy and not the stereotypical cool, calm, collected pilot-type. I want everything to be perfect. Trying to hire the right people is challenging. You find employees from your employees. Right now, our industry is very healthy, so if someone is out of a job, there is probably a reason, and maybe not a good one."

Dream Jobs & Sleepless Nights

Cunnings and Ninette, his wife of nine years, are native Californians and met in Fresno when she was attending Fresno State University for her masters degree in Education. The couple has three sons with the newest member being Caydon, who is 11 months old. Carson, 5 and Cameron, 4 are budding soccer players.

"Soccer just started and my life, as I know it, has ended," Cunnings laughs.

Children, especially healthy children, are important to Cunnings and to Barrier Specialty Roofing. The company contributes to the efforts of a variety of children's charities and organizations such as Angel Flight, Valley Children's Hospital near Fresno, the California Children's Choir, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Shriners's Hospital, and McGruff Crime Stoppers Foundation.

Cunnings grew up in and around sports and recalls his first job ever was selling sodas at Fresno State football games. "I made a couple hundred dollars a night, which was pretty good for a young kid."

In addition to his passion for golf and flying, Cunnings loves college football, more specifically, USC football, and he tries to get to about four games a

year. He may want to step that up a bit as he admits his dream job, if his present gig was non-existent, would be serving as USC's athletic director. Maybe current USC AD Michael Garrett has a dream to run a roofing and coatings business and the two men could swap for a week.

The late president Ronald Reagan gets Cunnings' vote for the person he most admires. "He's my idol," says Cunnings. "I bumped into him once long ago on a golf course."



He was a real people person and very intelligent."

While he doesn't remember who first uttered, "If you want something, go get it," Cunnings feels it's the best advice he's received. "And," he adds, "don't complain if it doesn't happen."

These words dovetail into advice Cunnings would give to someone coming into this business. "The biggest thing is that people are not fully capitalized," he says. "Plus, know your market."

When he first started, Cunnings recalls that he probably had 15 customers, which made him believe that he could do this job. "I created a business plan and followed it for three years," he says. "Just know that there will be sleepless nights and lots of stress."

Apparently, the sleepless nights and lots of stress haven't taken a toll on Cunnings' physical features. "Talking to me, people think I'm older," he says. "I'm 39 years old. I look younger and, maybe to them, look too young to own a business."

Maybe more surprising is that Cunnings, the CEO of a roofing company, is afraid of heights. "Funnily enough, I am scared of high roofs, but flying the airplane does not scare me," he laughs. "It's the only place I can catch any peace." CP