

Newsmaker | Mike Feuz

WHO IS HE?

President, Otto Construction Co.

THE ESSENTIALS

- **Age:** 55
- **Born in** Torrance, raised in Auburn, lives now in Roseville with wife, Keren, and son, Johnny, 13. They also have two daughters, Kira, 23, and Mari, 20.
- **Education:** Bachelor's degree in fine arts, Northern Arizona University

HIS FAVORITE THINGS

- **Book:** "Cryptonomicon" by Neil Stephenson
- **Movie:** Science fiction, minus blood and guts
- **Restaurant:** Izumi's in Roseville
- **Music:** Variety, especially lyrics with a sense of humor and irony
- **Hobbies:** Reading, woodworking
- **Quote:** "Say what you mean and mean what you say." Author unknown
- **Pet peeve:** People who don't follow through on their commitments

WHAT WOULD YOUR FRIENDS BE SURPRISED TO FIND OUT ABOUT YOU?

In high school and college, I got seriously into comic books. I probably have 6,000 or 7,000 comic books stashed in the house that I haven't looked at in years. I used to have a standing order at the store and would get 30 or 40 comic books every month. Of course, they were something like 12 cents apiece then, and now I think they're \$3.95. Sometimes I would take the girl I was dating with me, and I'm happy to say that she married me anyway. I'm not sure why I still have them. Some of them might be worth a lot of money now.

BOB SCHMIDT | CORRESPONDENT

These are difficult times, and the construction industry in particular has been hit hard by the economic downturn. But Mike Feuz, president of the Otto Construction Co., a family-owned firm that has been in business since 1947, says the company "is in pretty good shape."

"I have to say that we're very fortunate," Feuz said. "Our backlog is actually growing a little bit, and our projects are profitable. Like everybody else, we've had to downsize, and that's difficult to do. We're down probably 40 percent from the end of 2008, from about 130 office and on-site employees to about 80.

"The company has always been very conservatively run by the Otto family, and so we have a great financial base to help us get through times like this. We've been able to take advantage of some things, and we continue to reinvest in our system and our people. We're positioning ourselves so that when things get better, we'll be ready."

Feuz, who started with the company in 1981 as an apprentice carpenter, was named president in 2007. His father was a company superintendent before him, and his two daughters worked for Otto during summers.

"This company has been an important part of my family's life for about 40 years," he said.

What is the company working on?

We're working on the new lottery headquarters right now, and recently we were selected for a \$22 million renovation project at the Sonoma Valley

Hospital. We're getting ready to start an expansion of the Feather River Hospital emergency department, and we're working on the Township 9 development.

You started as an apprentice carpenter with the company, and now you're the president. How did you learn to be a manager?

I've always found myself in management positions. I put myself through school working in food service, starting as a dishwasher, and ended up managing the breakfast and lunch meals. Here at Otto, I often wound up managing projects.

I'm not sure why it worked out that way, but one of my hobbies is reading business books. The best advice is to get people smarter than you are and let them do what they're hired to do, and, most important, to listen to them.

When you were growing up, were you thinking about a career in construction?

I started off wanting to be a scientist of some sort, maybe a chemist. I evolved into wanting to be an architect all through high school, and even went for a couple of years to UC Berkeley, in the architecture program.

... I ended up going to

Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, where I got a degree in fine arts.

How did you start with Otto?

When I graduated, I called my dad and said I wanted a job so I could earn some money and go back to school. He said he could get me on with Otto as a laborer or an apprentice carpenter. I thought laborer sounded like hard work, so I said I'd sign as an apprentice carpenter.

I found out apprentice carpenters get paid less than laborers, and you didn't do any carpenter work for two years; what you did was spread gravel or shovel concrete, what I thought laborers did.

I thought I'd do that for a couple of years, earn some money, and go back to school. Then, Otto needed some drafting done, and I could do that so I did and started working my way up. Next January, it will be 30 years.

While you have a soapbox, you want to rant about anything?

Well, not rant, really, but I wonder sometimes that, as a culture, we're getting too specialized. There aren't enough generalists out there. People seem to see one tree, and they can't see the forest. I think we're losing something there.

