



Brian Webster's photo from The Dallas Business Journal's 2020 "Top 40 Under 40" article.

FROM THE AUTHOR

It was in August of 2004 that Keller Webster and Warner Stone made their partnership official and founded KWA Construction. In the years leading up to its twentieth anniversary, KWA has grown to be one of the most well-known multifamily construction powerhouses in Texas - building over 90 projects and delivering over 13,000 units across the Lone Star State.

I sat down with Brian Webster, KWA's President to learn more about KWA's history and his take on the last twenty years. Brian shares his insights on building a company, working with family and continuing his father's mission for KWA of passionately developing their people, building great places and enhancing the lives of those around them.



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Left: KWA Construction's first project - The Sullivan in Dallas, Texas. Below: KWA's co-founders Warner Stone and Keller Webster.



TWENTY YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

An Interview with Brian Webster, President of KWA Construction

This year marks the twenty year anniversary of KWA Construction, which was founded by Keller Webster and Warner Stone. What prompted them to partner together and form a new construction firm specializing in multifamily developments?

Prior to co-founding KWA, my father, Keller, had spent the majority of his career building apartments, and had previously built apartments for Warner.

Back then, Keller and Warner had known each other for years through working together. Then, back in 2004, an opportunity presented itself for them to go into business together. And ultimately, that's what happened.

So, they decided to just go for it?

[Chuckling] Yes, they decided to just go for it.

Warner helped Keller get started and has been a part of the company ever since. We've built twenty projects together with Warner over the years.

You started at KWA eighteen months after the company was founded. When do you first remember taking an interest in construction and then pursuing it as a career path?

My father had been involved in construction his whole life, which meant as I was growing up, I was around it literally my whole life. Whether that meant as a kid, going to job sites on the weekend with my father, to my first job at fifteen years old picking up trash on job sites. That's kind of how it all got started way back then. But shortly after that, I thought I wanted to be a salesperson. So, after I graduated from college, I did just that. My wife, Holly and I ended up moving to California, and I became a salesperson. During that time, I learned a lot about sales and what that all entailed. But ultimately, Holly and I both found the desire to be back in Texas greater than being out in California. It was then that the opportunity to come work for Keller and KWA was brought up. We made the decision to move back to Dallas and I started shortly thereafter working for KWA as an assistant superintendent.



Yes, I saw that! You were an assistant super on the Clyde Lane project, correct?

Yes! The Clyde Lane Condos.

So, here you are, working for your dad less than two years after the company was started. How was that experience for you?

It was great! Now...being young and naive was helpful.

[Chuckling] It was? How so?

What I mean is - it was great being around and experiencing what it takes to start and grow a business. KWA was still in its infancy as a company. But fortunately, we had some great opportunities. I went to work on a condominium project which taught me a lot - both technically about construction and ultimately about condos. It was an interesting deal. It was a ninety-unit project in Uptown Dallas off of Oak Grove and McKinney Avenue, right next to a cemetery. One of the things that made it interesting was that on about the seventh or tenth day of the project, we had the chief building official from Dallas there, trying to shut the project down because someone alleged that they found human bones on the job site. Ultimately, it turned out they were NOT human bones - but it just emphasizes that on any given day, you never know what you can predict on a job site.



Above: Keller and Brian at KWA's 20th anniversary party at The Rustic in Dallas, Texas. Left: Brian with some of KWA's project team.

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“If you’re not at the table,
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Meaning - in order to be
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What kind of bones did they end up being?

[Smirking] They were identified as pig bones.

OK, so very close then.

[Laughing] Yes.

***Growing up, did you see yourself at one point working
alongside your father?***

No, not at all! If I would have thought that, I would have gone and pursued a construction degree, which I don't have. I have a degree in engineering, but it's not a construction engineering degree. What I will say is that I run into all kinds of people in the industry where construction isn't necessarily their academic background. Construction has attracted a wide variety of people to the industry. But no - it just kind of happened naturally. Honestly, I never really thought the opportunity would present itself the way that it did. It just seemed like something to try to pursue, working with my dad. My father has been involved in the construction industry for... geez...going on fifty years now.

Keller went into the construction industry after he came out of the military, right?

Yes, he did. And ultimately, from everyone you talk to, he was regarded as a well-respected construction professional. Keller was always very active in multiple government advocacy efforts, trying to improve the industry as a whole.

That is so important. In fact, I remember you mentioning that Keller was involved in many different organizations.

Yes, even before KWA when Keller was at different companies that he operated, he has always been involved in different atmospheres - such as the National Association of Homebuilders, the Texas Association of Builders and the Dallas Builders Association (DBA).



Keller and Brian accepting the 2018 Aggie100 Award on behalf of KWA Construction.

Is that why you yourself have always been involved in those organizations as well?

Yes, absolutely. One hundred percent. I got involved with the DBA shortly after I showed up. I would say that I've been involved in the Multifamily Builders Council for the last fifteen years or so, and for the last ten years on the DBA's big board of directors. Again, trying to give back to the industry. My father used to say, "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu." Meaning - in order to be an active participant in your potential future you need to be a part of the conversations that sets the building requirements in place. That's why my father was always very involved regarding advocacy. For years, he was a member of the Dallas Fire Code and Appeals Board, trying to help not only understand, but educate people regarding the different fire systems required for multifamily construction.

I have to ask - when you first joined KWA, was it your goal to one day be President?

[Laughing] No! Not at all. When I first showed up? No. I was just a green employee new to the industry and just trying to learn what I could. Ultimately, it was the people I met and that came into my world that helped pass the industry along to me and teach me the business. But no - that was never my initial goal to start. The goal was just to try to create a career that ultimately could support my family. Obviously, my father founding KWA and running the company gave me different insights that others might not get just because I was around him so often. But it wasn't my plan back in 2006 to get to where I am today.

That brings me to my next question. In your early days at KWA, what did you observe of Keller's leadership style?

Keller's leadership style was always one of trying to operationally control the business and having his hands in a lot of the pie, so to speak. Coming from an operations background, that's what he was good at. For a lot of the time, Keller was kind of the operations manager and our project managers reported to him. As we got larger, Keller made the decision to bring on a Director of Operations, which helped spur another level of growth for KWA. But, Keller has always been a very helpful leader and one who supports his employees.

Let's talk more about that. That is something internally at KWA that Keller has been known for - really caring about his employees and those we work with. That is something I have witnessed reflected in your leadership style as well.

Sure! Well, as managers of these projects, we don't "build" anything. [Laughing] Now, I'm joking there when I say, "We don't build anything". We ultimately don't have the hammer to the nails. When building these construction projects, it's more like coaching a team than it is being a player on a team. So, it takes a great coach to get the most out of everybody on each of these individual projects. Whether that's our team or the subcontracting community. To make sure that our projects, are the ones benefitting all the different stakeholders to the greatest degree. That's why we want to make sure we are pushing the jobs forward. We also try to not be too aggressive when buying the jobs from our subcontractors partners. We really want a team of all of the different people and subcontractors involved in these projects, so everyone is able to be successful on every project. If we can help support them and benefit them, they will be eager and excited to bid for and work on the next project. And that's how we think about building a long-term sustainable company.



In my five years with KWA, I have heard you quote some "Keller-ism's" or learnings and sayings from your father. What are some that stick out most to you, or that you try to live by when it comes to leading KWA?

A lot of them may not make sense out of context. But, some of what he has taught me over the years are things like "The end date never changes." What that means is, at KWA - independent of what we come across on a project, our goal is that we try to finish by the original time we said. Another good one is "We work from 'can' until 'can't.'" Meaning - we work as diligently as we need to make sure the job gets done. Then there is the one that you have heard me use on many occasions, which is "The client has no more money." Which means, we try to operate under the understanding that what we bid is what we need to build - and take care of our clients with that understanding. Not going back to them trying to see if there is any more money, so to speak.

As you reflect back on the last twenty years, what have you noticed most about the changes in the projects that KWA has built?

Well, I think ultimately - and this is a real "genius" reflection - but the projects have gotten so much larger! When we first started, we were building thirty to forty-unit projects pretty consistently. A large project around that time was probably around two hundred units. Whereas today, we have projects nearly four hundred units in size along with substantial construction dollars associated with them. That's obviously the big takeaway - how much larger the projects have gotten over the years. But, the complexity has also gotten much more challenging. The bigger the projects get, the more



Above: KWA's annual outing to the Texas Rangers, inside Texas Live at the ballpark in Arlington, Texas. Left: KWA's project team at Remy Apartments in Frisco, Texas.



Left: Groundbreaking of Arlington Commons in Arlington, Texas. Below: The KWA team at The Dallas Business Journal's 2022 Best Places to Work awards luncheon.

extensive the coordination and complexity of all of the different systems and parts and pieces that go into the projects have gotten as well. The other thing that has happened is the evolution of all the codes we have to work under. When we started, it wasn't crazy to think that there was a 1989 code that we were operating under in 2004. Now, it's very rare that a couple years pass that substantial code changes don't happen. We always have to be on top of what the industry is requiring and what the different regulations are and make sure we are complying with all of them.

What were some unexpected challenges that occurred over these last twenty years, and how did KWA overcome them? Of course, we can talk about the pandemic if you like, but what were the others that you would like to discuss?

Well, I think there have been lots of challenges. Typically, multifamily construction runs at about an eight-year cycle historically. It usually dips for a little bit, then upon some fundamentals improving, you start to run up another eight-year cycle. Some of those challenges that have ended a cycle before were the great recession, where we had the financial crisis that impacted banking and lending. We've run into different labor shortages at times where it's become challenging to make sure we had all the people that we needed to build projects. And yes, working through the pandemic was a more recent challenge we encountered that was not on the radar before it popped up. How we overcome them is - we adapt to the current situation, make sure we can execute on the work that we have and make sure our clients are satisfied. Because, ultimately, we are in the "repeat client" business. We really want to have successful relationships so the people that we work with want to come back and work with us again.

So, let's shift a bit and talk about the culture at KWA. Since I have been here, I've attended everything from topping-out parties, to retirement parties, awards ceremonies, holiday parties, jobsite trick-or-treating, and many other types of celebrations. What have been some of your favorite "KWA" moments over the last twenty years?

Yeah! I like any event when we get to celebrate the people that are out there working hard, building the buildings. We can't do anything without all the different people that it takes to build our projects. So - my favorites are when we help celebrate and recognize every single person that helps make the projects come true, which makes our clients dreams come true, which ultimately makes our dreams come true. At times, we are merely a conduit to make sure that all happens. But, ultimately celebrating all the successes of others is really what brings me a lot of joy.

I do have another quote for you.

Oh good! Which quote is it?

The quote that my father really enjoyed that I reflect on a lot is - "Planting a tree that you will never enjoy the shade of." Meaning - we never know who is going to live in our apartments or the buildings that we've built. What we can try to do is make sure they are built extremely well, so that whomever is living there, for whatever reason they may be living there, has a quality apartment to call their home.

That is great! Now, I'd like to ask about your two boys. Are either of them showing an interest in construction?

[Chuckling] No, not currently. But, similar to my dad's approach, nothing has been pushed. My oldest is getting to an age where he may need a job pretty soon. So, he may get a little bit of an education as it relates to working. And if he so chooses, he may be directed to pick up trash as I did and be a part of a clean-up group.



Another thing my father used to say that I reflect on a lot is – “Planting a tree that you will never enjoy the shade of.” Meaning – we never know who is going to live in our apartments or buildings that we’ve built. What we can do is make sure they are built extremely well so that whomever is living there has a quality apartment to call their home.

Next, I’d like to ask about those specific things that keep you going, that you enjoy about coming in and working with the team that you have built.

Ultimately, I enjoy people seeing success and growing throughout their careers. I feel strongly that I’m in the “people business” as much as I’m in the construction business. We can’t do anything without them. We want people that align with our values and approach the industry in a way that we can all be proud of. We want people who are interested in growing their skills and abilities so they can move up and do different things in the construction industry, while being able to take care of their families to the greatest extent possible.

Last question. If you were going to give a commencement speech to a graduating class of 2024 that has their eyes set on a career in construction, what are some of the key points of advice you would give them when it comes to building their career, working with family, and in general – about life?

So, some highlights of this speech would be that I would tell anybody and everybody to never stop learning. The world is moving faster than it ever has before. So I would encourage people to never stop learning and always be on the lookout for what the next big thing is – what could change the business. Whether that’s for the good or the bad. But specifically – what could help improve your business when it comes to technologies and tools. My other general advice about working in construction is – the world is incredibly small. This is something I’ve observed over the last twenty years in the construction world and in the multifamily space.



The clubhouse at The Village at Rayzor Ranch in Denton, Texas.

Always be aware that the decisions you make today can have ramifications for the future. And just to know that, ultimately, we need to be very careful and react appropriately when faced with challenges.

Family is an interesting dynamic. What I would say about working with family is to make sure you can communicate appropriately and try to set some boundaries so it’s not all work, all the time. Keller was very good with me about that. Work time was work time, and family time was family time. Yes, it overlapped every once in a while, but it wasn’t a constant. And I very much appreciated that. It was a little bit of a challenge because we all talk about what we do. And when you do similar things, you have to be intentional about not talking too much about work.

When it comes to life advice, what I would say is – things come and go, but it is the experiences and relationships that you make along the way that really is the most impactful to your world. So, be really careful of who you surround yourself with – whether it’s your friend group or your work group. As someone once told me, “It’s hard to soar like an eagle when you are surrounded by turkeys.” But – really, what I would want them to have as a takeaway is that life is short and you want to take advantage of all the different opportunities out there. Not to be scared to try new things. This goes back to the rate of change. We all are going to have to try different things at one point – whether we want to or not. So, being open to change and trying to create special experiences for you, or for your family – those are the things you really remember later in life.

-Karen Herrera

Below: Keller at Brian inside the fitness center at The Village at Rayzor Ranch in Frisco, Texas



Above: The KWA team after Caroline Eastside Apartments topping out celebration in Richardson, Texas

Right: KWA's project team overseeing subcontractors framing a project.



Below: Celebrating Women in Construction week.

