

Goodrich oversees growth of construction firm now celebrating 75 years

By KEVIN OKLOBZIJA

When you've been in business 75 years, as is the case for LeChase Construction Services, LLC, the milestones on the company timeline are many.

From the founding in 1944 by Raymond LeChase to the first contract, a \$64 job for the City of Rochester for sidewalks; from Wayne LeChase joining his father in company management in 1967 to the first out-of-state expansion in 1999.

What you won't find in the official company logbook, though: a 1987 breakfast meeting at McDonald's on East Henrietta Road near Lehigh Station Road. That's when the firm's future leader and visionary, William Goodrich, said goodbye to LeChase Construction—and in doing so caused Wayne LeChase to demonstrate what happens when fingers compress those little Mini Moo's containers too firmly.

"He really blindsided us," LeChase said the other day. "It was not a good day for the LeChase organization."

Indeed, losing the heir apparent to the leadership mantle was unexpected. Goodrich had only been with firm for two years, but during that time company executives could see his potential, his talent, his way of fitting into, and nurturing, the LeChase culture.

Thus, when Goodrich summoned



Photo by Kate Melton

firm President Wayne LeChase and Executive Vice President Pierre Loncle to breakfast to tell them he would be pursuing a venture as a partner in Construction Advisors East, the news didn't go over well.

"Wayne had two creamers in his hands that he didn't quite get into his coffee and when I told him, squish, there was creamer all over; I swear to God, it was a mess," Goodrich said.

As creamer was sopped up from the table, and LeChase digested the news, Loncle provided a calming voice of reason.

"Pierre said, 'You've got to give this guy a chance, how's he ever going to know. You don't want him 30 years from now going, 'What if?'" Goodrich said. "Pierre put some reason into it. He was very close to Wayne and sort of was guiding and coaching Wayne on who he thought the future should be. Wayne was always listening because Pierre was very wise. He was and still is (at age 93) very wise."

As the meeting was breaking up, LeChase asked one thing: If the new venture doesn't work out, will you call me?

Just 14 months later, Goodrich gathered LeChase and Loncle again for breakfast, this time at Denny's on Buffalo Road in Gates.

"The business I left for did not work out, the business did not succeed, so I was following up on a commitment to Wayne," Goodrich said. "But I thought I was just going to tell them I was going to be taking a job in Buffalo, my wife (Rhonda) and I were going to raise a family."

That evening, when his wife asked about the meeting, Goodrich didn't provide an immediate response.

"She said, 'What happened?'" Goodrich said. "I said, 'Rhonda, I don't know if I can work for anyone else.' She said, 'What do you mean?' I said,

'I can get a job,' I felt confident I could get a job, 'but the values and what Wayne stands for, I don't think I'm going to find that.'"

His wife's response: "But we already bought a house."

Goodrich knew, however, he had to rejoin LeChase, so for the next seven years he commuted from Buffalo to Rochester before the family finally moved back in December 1996.

He has no intention of going anywhere again.

"He ended up in the right place," Wayne LeChase said.

The hiatus was beneficial, though, Goodrich said.

"I don't regret the decision," he said. "There were only four of us (at Construction Advisors East), so I had to do everything from soup to nuts; from the estimates, the contracts, to insurances, the execution, the closeouts, customer interface, sub-contractor interface. I had a chance to have a greater exposure than just running projects."

"So when I came back to LeChase, I came back more well-equipped to understand all of the nuances with running a business, all of the idiosyncrasies and challenges of running a business. It kind of maybe propelled the journey."

On day 1 of his return, he was in the office at 5:30 a.m. and Loncle put him in charge of the bid, and then construction, of the Sears store at what was then Irondequoit Mall.

"It was the greatest opportunity," Goodrich said.

The rise up the food chain began in earnest in 1995, when Goodrich was promoted to vice president and a partner in the firm. At the time, annual revenue was \$90 million. Two years later, he was promoted to chief operating officer. In 2002, the title of president was added. In 2007, he became

CEO and a year later became CEO and managing partner, which meant control and governance.

In 2018, LeChase revenue hit \$940 million. The firm, the largest construction company in the region, has done work in 38 states as well as in Dubai, Brazil, England and Canada. "We will travel anywhere for certain clients," Goodrich said. "We're currently doing work in Nigeria and Panama."

Wayne is still a partner and chairman of the board, and his son, Raymond Jr., is a vice president and partner. But Goodrich has been guiding operations during the period of significant growth.

"I can't tell you how many ways Bill has impacted the company between where it is today and where it was in 1985," LeChase said. "Bill was part of helping develop the company culture, its growth pattern and the common good for the whole organization."

And to think that the family tree suggested Goodrich would end up with a career in education, not construction management. Teaching and helping shape young minds had been the family tradition, at places like Duke University, the University of North Carolina and Bryn Mawr College.

Goodrich's older brother, Jack, broke tradition and decided to pursue civil engineering when he headed to college. Like brother, like brother.

"My brother and I were probably most aligned in our likes and things to focus on; math and sports," Bill Goodrich said. "He decided to go the civil engineering route. I had no idea what I wanted to do after high school, but I always looked up to my brother and followed in his footsteps."

A vice president at LeChase, Jack is

William Goodrich

Title: CEO and managing partner, LeChase Construction Services, LLC.

Age: 54.

Education: B.S. in business from Roberts Wesleyan College, A.A.S. in construction engineering technology from Alfred State, owner/president management program at Harvard University 2016.

Family: wife, Rhonda; daughter Courtney (a local special education teacher), son Kyle (a project engineer in the LeChase North Carolina office).

Home: Perinton.

Activities: Time at the lake, travel, time with family, reading, fitness.

Quote: "It's not what you've done for me for the last 10 or 20 years, it's what can you do for me today and tomorrow. We never rest and become complacent. There's always opportunity for improvement."

GOODRICH

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now based in North Carolina and oversees the LeChase strategy and growth initiatives in the southeast.

Bill completed the OPM program at Harvard University, studied business at Roberts Wesleyan College and construction engineering technology at Alfred State, which launched his career.

"I was hired right out of college to be an engineer in Annapolis, Maryland, working on storm water outfalls into the Chesapeake Bay, which was interesting," he said, "but I did not see myself sitting at a drafting table. I had too much energy to sit stationary."

He came to Rochester to work for John P. Bell and Sons but soon jumped to LeChase.

"We were doing about \$22 million a year (in gross revenue) at the time," he said. "I was very fortunate at that time because you had the opportunity to do everything from the administrative side to actually putting the work in place—pouring the concrete, running the equipment. At that point in time, the Christmas parties were in Wayne LeChase's living room; that was the size of the company."

Now you need a small arena. There are 800 total employees, with 350 to 400 in Rochester. Through growth, the connection between LeChase and Goodrich has grown stronger.

"The relationship with Wayne and I is very unique on several levels," Goodrich said. "The level of trust in each other is incredible. It's unmatched."

Said LeChase: "Bill and I have become good friends, and that has helped enhance the business relationship we have enjoyed over the years. We're both very concerned about our customers, our employees, our community."

The driving force for the firm, first for Raymond and Wayne LeChase and now Goodrich, is the concept on which the company was founded:

"Do the right thing; always do the right thing," Goodrich said. "Do the right thing for our people, do the right thing for our customers, do the right thing for our communities."

"We're a service organization. We don't manufacture the products that we use. We build things, but we're actually being hired for our services, we're being hired for our people, and the trust and the ability to be able to deliver a project or facility on time, on budget."

That's why company culture is critical, he believes.

"The offices we have in the communities we are in become community based," Goodrich said. "We're not just coming there to do a job and then leave. We're actually coming into these regions to become part of the community; to go to church, to shop, to pay taxes, to go to school, to provide employment, to have families live there and thrive there."

Thus, relationships are formed—and maintained.

"Close to 90 percent of business is repeat business, repeat customers," Goodrich said. "We're always looking for new customers but we value and nurture and work very hard at maintaining the relationships we have."

One of those is with ESL Federal Credit Union. LeChase built ESL's headquarters at 225 Chestnut St., with

a christening in the spring of 2010.

"When you work with LeChase, you work with their people," Faheem Masood, president and CEO of ESL, said. "They take tremendous pride in their work and they want to make sure their customers are getting what they want. Through the entire process with our headquarters, Bill was very involved."

"Do the right thing; always do the right thing. Do the right thing for our people, do the right thing for our customers, do the right thing for our communities."

— William Goodrich

Goodrich believes involvement in all aspects of the community is vital, and not just when it comes to work projects. He very much believes in giving back, and serves on several boards, including Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield, Hillside Family of Agencies, CMAC, Greater Rochester Enterprise and the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce.

"If you're active in the community, you will cross paths with Bill," Masood said. "He's someone who understands his position and he does not take that responsibility lightly."

In the workplace, no aspect of operations at LeChase is more important than safety.

"We want everyone at the end of the day to go home safely to their families, period," Goodrich said. "And that's all our stakeholders, not just our people but our sub-contractors, the general public, anyone associated with a project. It's a very risky business we're in, a very dangerous business, so we invest heavily in our safety programs, certainly our systems, our processes, our people, our training. When you walk on a LeChase job site, it's clear safety is paramount."

One accident is one too many, he says.

"We're well below any national averages, but we want to make sure we have zero incidents," Goodrich said. "We believe zero can be achieved. It's conceivable, it's believable."

Zero growth, however, is not a good thing, so LeChase continues to eye expansion through a measured approach.

"We have 11 offices, with five acquisitions since 2005," Goodrich said. "Our company has grown organically and through acquisition, and it's been a successful model."

"We're close to being a billion dollar organization, where it has nothing to do with the top line. It has to do with our ability to execute and deliver the services at the level of expectations that our customers deserve and expect."

That's why growth is methodical. The company standards must never suffer just so the firm can become larger.

"We must maintain the level of ex-

cellence we're delivering today," Goodrich said.

"Before we can even want to grow, we have to make sure we're delivering and meeting the expectations of our customers and our people."

That's why acquisitions are made periodically, not annually.

"If you look at our growth along the way: we've gone up, plateaued, gone up, plateaued," Goodrich said. "And that's allowed us to learn and improve our systems and train our people along the journey."

"The key to it is making sure we're engaging our employees, to ensure we're providing opportunity for our people. Continued growth, professional development, and that they can clearly see a career path for themselves and how that contributes to the organization. We believe that's the key vs. just getting more work or expanding. We focus inwardly to our people."

That, in turn, allows LeChase to maintain a presence in the marketplace. The firm has the largest share of work in the Rochester area, although 75 percent of the total business is done elsewhere.

What is it that leads to success in what is a very competitive business? "Listening to our customers and then being able to deliver what it is that is most important to them," Goodrich said.

LeChase doesn't rely on any sector for profitability. The company's business is spread among five market sectors: health care, education, industrial,

commercial and multi-family. Health care and education comprise around 50 percent of revenues. The balance allows for financial health during economic turmoil.

"We have built a model of diversification, so the different markets that we play in both geographically and service-wise allows us to ebb and flow with the inevitable market cycles," Goodrich said. "And we've seen them; in the 34 years I've been here, we've seen at least three strong cycles and then maybe a couple others that have seen some dips. That allows us to weather the storm. We can share resources, we can shift resources, we can shift our areas of focus."


"If we were niche focused, I think we'd actually feel that potential pain. But we've been able to successfully navigate through. It's not a matter of if but when that next cycle comes, so we always have to be mindful of that. We're always trying to look out five, 10, 15 and 20 years, to the best we can."

"We really try to be a student of the industry and very in tune to what's going on in each one of our markets, so we can be proactive instead of reactive to any cycle changes."

With 75 years of history, clients know LeChase isn't going anywhere.

"If you look at them, you will see longevity," ESL's Masood said. "Bill will always go the extra mile and he will be there for you."

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