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Making the world a better place

Kimbel Mechanical thrives through efficient project execution



From l to r: Project manager Brandon Batchelor, Rob Kimbel, CEO/owner, and COO Brad Smith are instrumental in making Kimbel Mechanical Systems Inc. run like a well-oiled machine.

As a dark economic cloud wrapped itself around the U.S. market, one mechanical contracting firm held steady through diversification, a proven track record with multi-family housing, military work and other large scale projects.

Kimbel Mechanical Systems Inc., headquartered in Springdale, Ark., is a firm that now employs 75 people and is actively recruiting a dozen more technicians. A few years before the housing bust, company managers felt what seemed to be a tremor or two that prompted them to assess their involvement in new construction work.

At the time, their military, tax credit, and multi-family work was growing. “So we moved toward these eagerly, and the decision paid off,” said Brad Smith, COO.

Over the past few years, a growing percentage of their employees have been involved in these types of projects, anywhere between New England and Texas. They’re growing, too, at a time when many larger firms are struggling.

Jobsites nationwide

For the past five years, Kimbel Me-

chanical has operated on a nearly national scale. With 80 jobsites currently in progress between Massachusetts and Oklahoma, it’s no surprise that they run a tight ship.

“Our ability to work successfully over such a broad geographic area can be attributed to many things,” said Smith. “We feel we’ve got a great

units and 10 units that were abandoned by a previous contractor. It’s substantial: each of the living units are 1,500- to 1,800-sq.-ft, three-bedroom homes.

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management team, a culture that encourages efficiency and good work, and a highly efficient logistics system. After all, we purchase and move a lot of equipment, supplies and materials over a large area, and the clock is always ticking.”

The company is in the process of completing nearly 1,000 single-family home renovations at an Air Force base in Arkansas, expected to be finished in the summer of 2011. They are also completing plumbing installations for 133 new construction

products need to meet a completely separate set of standards on all facets of the job, and installed equipment, must also comply with the Buy American Act.

“Managing materials for any of the military jobsites is 10 times more complicated than for civilian residential jobs,” Smith said.

All the military housing units have Bradford White 50-gallon power vent water heaters with the new Icon system. The Icon water heater control system is right in line with the gov-

ernment interests — safety and efficiency all in one simple package.

Kimbel also replaced and repaired many of the sewer taps, mains and lateral lines to the residences. This was a major undertaking since the lines were more than 50 years old. This required close coordination with the general contractor, base housing management, military personnel and the Air Force. A similar project is under construction at an Air Force base in Massachusetts.

The Air Force projects, however, began with a challenging twist. Though neither of the jobsites were Kimbel’s first military project, both were well under construction before being abandoned by a large commercial contractor that filed for bankruptcy and dissolved.

When the firm went under, there was a two-and-a-half year period where nothing happened. After that, federal contracts were cut for a new general contractor who chose Kimbel Mechanical Systems to resume the work.

“It was interesting, but unpleasant, to pick up where they left off,” added Smith. “There was minimal information and few blueprints available to us, so there was a lot of extra work needed to figure out what was there, and what needed to be done.”

In addition to these military projects, Kimbel has worked on military housing projects in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Kansas, and Virginia.

Guatemala-bound

No doubt, there’s a certain level of stress involved in growing a company amidst economic turmoil while sending people and material all over the country. High quality standards must be met consistently while meeting stringent deadlines. Kimbel managers acknowledge these needs and yet, at the same time, set their sites on giving back.

“It has become part of our culture, and now an important part of who we are as a company, and also as individuals,” said Smith.

“We know in our hearts that we’re blessed through our work and profitability, and — because of this — we knew there was more that we could do to make the world a better place,” he added. “We turned our attention toward some of the poorest people in the world — by sending crews to Casa Para Niños, one of the largest orphanages in Central America.”

“We believe that life is more than what you put in the bank,” continued Smith. “It’s not just about us. We, who have, are blessed with the
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Company history blends quality and discipline

(Continued from page 54.)

opportunity to share what God gave us, with those who do not have.”

So, while some Kimbel crews may be attending to the needs of a large commercial project in Richmond and others preparing for a big retrofit job in Louisiana, several other employees may be thousands of miles away in Central America.

While Kimbel’s crews (up to eight workers at a time) are at the orphanage, they fix plumbing in the numerous buildings and help out in any way they can. The scope and variety of work is endless. Projects range from well drilling and water tower construction, to installing strainers on sinks and routine maintenance.

“A friend and I did one project that included busting up some old concrete,” recalled Smith. “We were quite a sight to see, lumbering through customs with a jackhammer and a demo saw. We definitely paid the additional baggage fee that time,” he laughed.

Which employees are sent to Guatemala depends largely on two things; who wants to go, and who has the time. Another consideration is

what specific skill set is needed at the orphanage at that time. “If the guys are willing to volunteer their time, we help them get down there and coordinate the tasks they’ll need to do.”

Smith has been to Guatemala on ten separate occasions. Over the past three years, he and his wife Laura have gone through an arduous adoption process, hoping to open their hearts and home to an 11-year girl named old Suzie. “We already see her as a member of our family and feelings are mutual. We can’t wait to bring her home.”

Established by Miles Kimbel in 1984 in Cleveland, Kimbel Plumbing relocated to Springdale, Ark., 18 years ago. At the time, Miles focused entirely on residential plumbing.

Over the past decade, the firm diversified and began doing mechanical system work as well, changing their name from Kimbel Plumbing to Kimbel Mechanical Systems. To no surprise, the firm’s strong reputation has had no problem holding its own across the new territory.

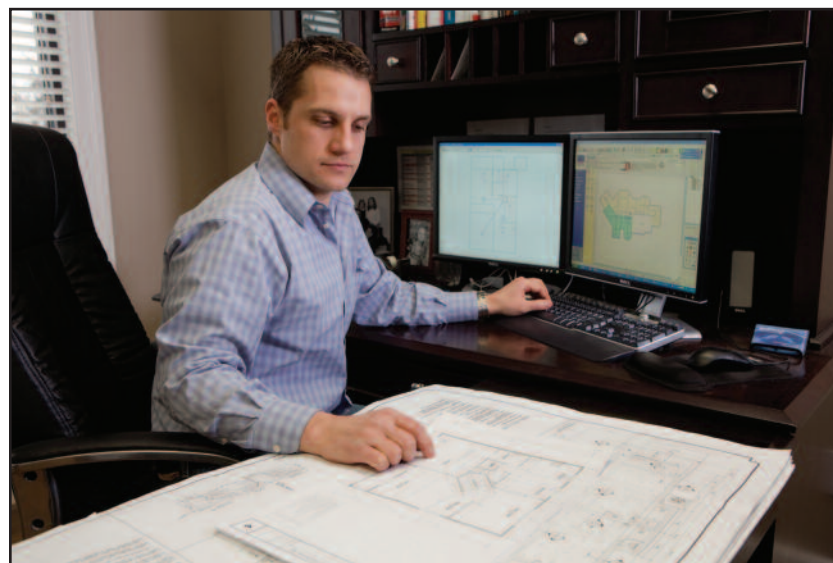
Kimbel’s mission statement is: *To be the leading professional mechan-*

ical company in all our markets. Through the delivery of quality work, disciplined project management and on-time completions, we will provide a healthy company to drive the success and sustainable growth of our contractors.

Now managed by Rob Kimbel, CEO, Smith, and Brandon Batchelor, senior

truck. Often times, three or four trucks will come in at once. As they’re dropping off systems at one end, we’re shipping them out to jobsites at the other.”

“I recall, for a big job at one Air Force base that Kimbel was doing, we shipped them 565 power vent Bradford White water heaters,” said



Project manager Brandon Batchelor bids on a project.

project manager, the company has grown into one of the largest mechanical contractors in the state. The firm had as many as 110 employees but needed to trim back during the worst of the recession.

Commercial as well

Although the military jobsites are on a commercial scale, Kimbel still considers that work, in essence, to be residential. Of all the work Kimbel does, 80% is residential, comprised chiefly of multi-family units and high-end, single residence houses. Their commercial work is just as varied as work on the residential side, comprised mainly of work at nursing homes, assisted living centers, hotels, office and tenant in-fill.

Kimbel will sometimes work on mechanical systems for large assisted living facilities where energy efficiency, and meeting resident demands, are a top priority.

On a recent job, Kimbel managers specified the placement of a 120-gallon, 95% efficient Bradford White eF water heater to supply kitchen and common area domestic hot water for the main building of a 96-unit facility. All the individual units have a small water heater by the same manufacturer.

Mass quantities

Kimbel has challenged Bradford White by ordering water heaters by the semi load. “We consistently install 60 water heaters a week out of our Springdale location,” said Smith. Up to 170 water heaters fit on one

Nathan Geyer at wholesale-giant Ferguson Enterprises - Springdale branch. “Kimbel has a big presence here. The size and scale of their operations is impressive.

Sometimes equipment is shipped directly from the factory to the jobsite, or to Kimbel’s warehouse; other times from the wholesaler’s warehouse to the jobsite. It’s no surprise to learn that the company stocks more inventory than many wholesalers do.

“Our relationship with Bradford White was established about 15 years ago. Within the past five or six years, I’ve seen many branches switch to Bradford White, mainly because of the service and product quality,” said Geyer.

On one air base job, Kimbel looked at the plans calling for atmospherically vented water heaters and went back to the GC to explain why direct vent heaters would be much better. Instead of the many “envelope” perforations required, the direct vent approach required only one wall penetration.

“The guys at Kimbel Mechanical Systems are always trying to better understand the plans and improve upon them,” said Tim Watkins, Bradford White’s sales rep at Wiggs, Haun + Bohan, in Nashville. “They don’t have any problem going back to the GC to talk about improvements.”

On the jobsite, or in Guatemala, managers at Kimbel share that vision: they’re making it a better place for everyone. ■



Plumber Derrick McGough installs a water heater.