



Jody Watkins, President and CEO of Watkins Landmark Construction, a general contracting firm based in San Diego, Calif.



A PASSION FOR BUILDING

Watkins Landmark Construction Brings Dynamic Solutions to Buildings Throughout Southern California

by Erica Bender

“I have this passion for building things ... of seeing things *change* on a daily basis,” says Jody James Watkins, President and CEO of Watkins Landmark Construction, a general contracting firm that provides a full range of services, including preconstruction, construction management and design-build. Watkins and his wife of 24 years, Jennifer, who serves as CFO, established the business in 2004 in San Diego, Calif.

Prior to forming his own company, Watkins spent the first part of his construction career at DPR Construction and

Clark Construction—large, renowned construction firms where he worked on award-winning projects, such as Petco Park, Indian Wells Tennis Garden, Pacific Athletic Club, and the Pfizer La Jolla campus. “Both firms provided me with some incredible learning experiences where I first learned the value of running a construction business that self-performs key construction scopes versus subcontracting,” says Watkins.

While his talents earned him multiple promotions at these companies, Watkins didn’t exactly fit into the mold of working under others. Truth be told, his penchant for speaking his

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View from inside Chop House at Indian Wells Tennis Garden Stadium 2.



View of the Indian Wells Tennis Garden Stadium 1, fully renovated by Watkins Landmark Construction. Some renovations and additions include 20 new dining options, suite expansions, a premier media center, and restrooms and concessions on the upper bowl.

mind with little to no restraint caused him to butt heads with some of his supervisors. He was full of ideas, insights, ambition—and his natural-born leadership instincts eventually led him to strike off on his own.

"I decided to open my own company because I wanted to look back on my career one day and say, 'At least I swung for the fences.' Fail or succeed, at least I tried to build something great and make a name for myself," he says.

His operation started small, with him often piggybacking off a coffeehouse chain's complimentary wi-fi access to manage the business. Watkins fondly recalls his first project, a custom 32-home development for a friend. Thanks to Watkins' extensive field experience and connections, the business quickly picked up speed, but lost traction like many other companies when the recession hit in 2008. It was a struggle to make

payroll after the economic downturn, but Watkins Landmark Construction managed to persevere. Now, the business is once again thriving, with Watkins managing a staff of 70 and running two busy offices in Carlsbad and Indian Wells. He has ambitious plans to expand to five locations by 2020.

LANDMARK PROJECTS

For the last 13 years, one of Watkins' professional goals has been to specialize in cutting-edge projects that leave a lasting impression on clients, end users and the community.

His company, which averages over \$130 million in annual revenue, caters

to clients mainly in southern California. The construction team handles a variety of project types: stadiums, churches, restaurants, office buildings, schools, aviation facilities, hotels and mixed-use developments. They have worked on a little bit of everything, from constructing an iconic seafood restaurant in downtown San Diego's urban entertainment district to building a pump station at a rural 8,000-acre water reservoir near the Arizona border. Suffice it to say that this general contractor's niche is *not* having a niche.

One of the company's biggest projects involved constructing a second tennis stadium for the Indian Wells

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Watkins Landmark Construction sponsored a water station at the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure in Balboa Park last November.

Tennis Garden. In just a little over 10 months, the project team built a new state-of-the-art, 8,000-seat facility, complete with a five-star dining area for fans to enjoy. This \$94 million landmark project, which maintained a perfect safety record, is what first put Watkins Landmark Construction on the map. “It really took us to the next level. We were no longer considered a small family-operated company—we became a competitive, up-and-coming construction business,” says Watkins.

This experience resulted in a continued relationship with the client. Just this month, the team completed a \$129 million renovation

of the original stadium at Indian Wells Tennis Garden.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING BLOCKS

One of Watkins’ top priorities is to build relationships with clients. Granted, pretty much any business in any industry has this same agenda. But for Watkins Landmark Construction, excellence and edification stem from an intuitive customer service strategy centered on serving the needs of the client.

“We believe that quality construction processes result in quality projects. It is our privilege to build what is, in many cases, a person’s dream,”

shares Watkins. “Our clients deserve to have their ambitions and years of hard work culminate into an incredible project that stands out in the community. A landmark. That is why our motto is ‘Build to Serve.’”

While the scale and prestige of a project is important, for Watkins, what matters most is the caliber of his team.

“Employees are the building blocks of our company; they are the foundation. My company is only as good as the people I hire,” he says.

Over the last couple of years, management has chosen to invest more in recruiting efforts, internship opportunities and employee training.

“We’ve concentrated on providing more in-depth training on project management software and our cost accounting system, as well as developing our quality assurance plan,” says Watkins.

Watkins’ firm promotes from within to reward and continue developing existing talent, and identifies “champions within those ranks who can teach their skill sets to other team members,” Watkins says. He also utilizes internships as a “prolonged interview” method to scout out individuals whose personalities and work ethics mesh well with the company culture.

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Watkins Landmark Construction celebrated a huge milestone by installing the last beam into the new-and-improved Indian Wells Tennis Garden Stadium 1. The beam was signed by the project owners, subcontractors, and Watkins Landmark Construction staff who attended the topping out ceremony held in October 2016.

“We are always looking at future prospects, so we try to actively pursue and recruit the best construction talents in the industry. If we find candidates who possess the potential to move up into a superintendent position or other leadership role, we usually hire them and train them up,” says Watkins.

Potential is not limited to just the skill sets listed on an applicant’s resume. Rather, a closer inspection of a candidate’s personality is what ultimately determines who is a good fit to add to Watkins’ team.

“From the resume alone, we can assess whether an individual has the necessary skills that we require,” says Watkins. He casually adds, “But from there they must pass what I call the ‘beer test’ which involves the question, ‘Would I want to have a beer with this individual?’ We have passed on well-qualified people who have failed the latter test.”

It’s challenging to maintain a close-knit, family-like work atmosphere in a growing business, admits Watkins. “When you grow big enough you start having to focus on things like policies and HR manuals. Those types of things peel away from the family feel of a company,” he says.

Fortunately, the President and CEO thrives on overcoming challenges. “For me, it’s important to reinforce a positive work culture that helps us keep the family feel,” says Watkins.

EMPLOYEE BONDS

To sustain a caring and supportive work environment, Watkins Landmark Construction looks to the community for team-oriented events and opportunities. Activities like team mud runs, happy hour gatherings, and outings at Petco Park or the Del Mar racetrack help support employee bonding.

Employee activities are organized by the Culture Council, an employee-engagement initiative developed by the company’s human resources manager. The council, which consists of office staff and other employee-leaders, meets monthly to coordinate events and discuss philanthropic opportunities.

“We especially love giving to charity and volunteering together,” adds Watkins. Examples of charities and groups that the company supports include Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the Encinitas Express soccer club, Loaves & Fishes Food Pantry in San Diego, and Susan G. Komen.

Watkins, who lost his mother to breast cancer four years ago, is especially devoted to promoting breast cancer research and awareness efforts.

In both his personal life and in his professional responsibilities, Watkins seeks out unique, meaningful ways to fill his time and make a difference. One can easily recognize how this *landmark* attitude will spur momentous changes in the years to come. 🦉

Author Bio: Erica Bender, a Texas-based freelance writer and communications consultant, has worked with clients in the AEC industry for 14 years.



Watkins Landmark Construction demolished three existing buildings and built a new worship center and a new children's ministry building for Solana Beach Presbyterian Church.



The Watkins Landmark Construction executive team (from left to right): Vice President of Construction Dan Poulton, COO Dennis Dizon, CFO Jennifer Watkins, CEO Jody Watkins, and Vice President of Business Development Dean Schumacher.