



A little less than a dozen miles from the University of South Florida campus is the business home of USF graduate Frank Ripa.

It has been 40 years since he graduated from the university with a degree in civil engineering and his journey has been long and fruitful and the amazing part of it all is that he is still so close to where it all started for him.

Ripa was the recent recipient of the USF Alumni Association's Fast 56 award, marking the fastest growing companies headed by Bulls alumni. "It's an honor to be one of the companies in the group," Ripa said as he looked back on a distinguished career of accomplishment that became possible by hard work and perseverance and a good dose of what Ripa called "timing, timing, timing."

And it was good timing.

His story began in Rome, N.Y. His parents made the decision to move the family to Miami to be near his aging grandparents where Ripa attended Miami Norland High School.

His journey to USF started the same the way it does for many youngsters, no matter what generation. "I wanted to stay in-state," he recalled. "My best friend, Elliott Parsowith, and I applied to USF. We were accepted and both decided on USF."

When he arrived, engineering was a consideration and the early handwriting was on the wall for Ripa. "At first, I didn't even know what an engineer did. But I was pretty good in math and science. I started out in electrical engineering but things changed when I got to know Dr. Barney Ross and Dr. Mel Anderson. "Working with Barney, I got into water and wastewater management," Ripa said, looking back on his undergraduate days. "I was one of his team members and that eventually led to my degree in civil engineering."

Ripa graduated in 1973 but hasn't forgotten the good memories of his time on campus. "USF gave me a strong educational experience and it was a great place for building social relationships."

"A lot of the people from engineering stayed in this area and worked for other companies and local governments. Some worked for competitors, some worked for municipalities. It helped my career a lot over the years."

Ripa's professional life after graduation started out with the City of Tampa, working as an engineer and project manager. He went on to Housel and Associates and then to the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council. He made a move to the fast-growing firm of Post, Buckley, Schuh and Jernigan where he became friends with land planner David Maltby and landscape architect Ed Czyncon. In 1981, the three formed Florida Land Design and Engineering. "We felt the three of us could do quite well," Ripa recalled.

He was spot-on. The multi-disciplinary company grew to 250 employees by 1989 and that was when west coast engineering firm Dames and Moore came knocking with an acquisition offer. "We were in the right place at the right time," Ripa said, hitting on his recurring professional theme.

He stayed on as a manager at Dames and Moore for three years but began to experience some fatigue. "I was burned out," Ripa said. It was in 1993 that he made a change and went to work for Florida Remediation Services and was responsible for their environmental construction work. As the firm grew, it started working on infrastructure projects. It was June of 1998 when Ripa made a life and career-changing decision.

He bought the infrastructure construction division and changed the name to Ripa and Associates, Inc.

He was finally on his own. His initial thought was that the company would stay small. "I thought we might grow to approximately twenty employees and maybe do about \$10 million in revenue per year."

So much for his initial perceptions.

Ripa and Associates grew and grew, very much like the Tampa Bay area grew in that equivalent time span. It was a time of growth and prosperity and his company was taking its part in the growth spurt. Less than 10 years later, it all started coming apart for the United States economy. The real estate bubble burst, construction in the state of Florida slowed to a dribble. "There were a lot of sleepless nights," Ripa remembered but it was his conservative nature that saved his company.

"What saved us is that I'm very conservative," he explained. "I was conservative as far as the amount of equipment we bought. Per our business plan, we used more sub-contractors rather than buying more equipment. Fortunately, we had saved up a decent amount of money. I was the only owner and basically my money was the company's money. It was a nervous time, for sure."

What the downturn provided for Ripa was opportunity.

"There were five companies (in the Tampa Bay area) that do what we do. We're the only one left. "At our peak, we had 280 employees and that dropped to 150. As other companies disappeared, we were able to hire some good key employees from other firms and that helped us tremendously. "We were able to get the cream of the crop, so to speak from the other companies that didn't make it. Now we have grown to over 325 employees, and we are stronger than ever," Ripa said proudly.

One of his key players is son-in-law Chris LaFace, the President of the company, who has been a driving force behind the company's latest growth spurt. RIPA currently serves as the Company's CEO and LaFace is responsible for the firm's day-to-day activities.

Chances are if you drive around the Tampa Bay area and take a glance at a construction site, you'll see a Ripa and Associates sign.

Two of the company's biggest current projects are the 71-acre campus for the St. Joseph's South hospital complex located in south Hillsborough County and the University Town Center, an indoor mall, being constructed in Sarasota County.

With the economic recovery in Florida, Ripa and Associates will stay busy. Ripa has been an advocate for new businesses in Hillsborough County and was one of the vocal supporters for the location of the Bass Pro Shops site near Brandon, not far from the headquarters of Ripa and Associates.

"If the county could do five of these types of deals, they should do it," Ripa said. "It will bring jobs and typically other retail businesses will follow." "This County needs jobs and the project would create 1,700 construction jobs," Ripa told the County Commissioners.

With business humming, Ripa has had a chance to reflect and he was quick to point out another key ingredient to his success. "I do have to give a lot of credit to my wife Jackie. I never thought of myself as the smartest guy around. She has done a lot for this company through the years. I met her when she was working as a real estate agent and I was working for an engineering firm.

"When we started, she was right there from the start doing everything, even answering the

phones," he recalled.

Ripa also beams with pride when he reveals another family connection at USF.

My daughter, Angela Ripa LaFace, is a 2013 graduate of the Morsani School of Medicine. She wants to be a surgeon, we're really proud of her," Ripa said, remembering how she started with a business degree at the University of Florida then tried a job within the company. "She worked for us here for a year and decided it wasn't for her. She went to USF, did her pre-med work and was accepted into the medical school." She is currently in her first year of general surgery residency at USF Health.

The Ripa family has a lot to smile about these days and the latest award from the Alumni Association is just another validation of great timing.

For, as Frank Ripa says, "it's all timing, timing, timing."

