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# Profiles

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# WHO BUILT OUR SCHOOLS?

**Have you ever stopped to think about the buildings and schools in our Valley? Who designed them; Who built them? Were the workers safe and paid well?**

The Central Valley is home to a vibrant commercial construction industry. Ranked at the top of the Fresno Business Journal's Commercial Contractor's list is Harris Construction. Harris has employed local tradespeople and office staff for over 100 years to work together to build many of the area's landmarks, parking structures, schools, hospitals, banks, food processing plants, stores, religious buildings, theatres, law enforcement facilities, and more. It even built the 13-acre African Adventure addition at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo.

No commercial construction project is easy. It takes months or years of dedication, experience and hard work. Rain or shine, in 100 degree heat or freezing temperatures. Early mornings and midnight concrete pours. The team at Harris Construction is always up for challenges. Every day.

**Meet Karl Cumbie, a third generation Harris Construction employee.** His grandfather, Woody Cumbie, started at Harris in 1945. Woody was a good man. Prim, proper, believed in every handshake. Woody treated people with respect and consideration; he had strong work ethics. Over the years, he worked his way up from a carpenter apprentice to a project superintendent. He was a dedicated and hardworking employee for Harris Construction for almost 35 years. He was good at what he did and he made personal relationships with every person - on every project - from the workers and laborers to the owners.

Grandson, Karl Cumbie, now himself a 22-year veteran at Harris, remembers his pre-teen years, following his grandfather around Harris jobsites after school and during the summers (back when children were still allowed on jobsites!), picking up tools, watching his grandfather interact with each person. Karl's father, Ken Cumbie, also continued the family tradition, having worked for Harris and other construction companies for most of his career, too.

"I didn't realize it at the time, but I was learning so much about working hard, being good to your word, about always

going the extra mile to make the project owner happy," said Karl. "I was hooked on construction and couldn't wait to someday use my grandfather's strength, character, and talent to work my own way up the construction management ladder."

Karl joined the Harris Construction team in 1993 and was proud to follow in his family's career path. He put his tools on, learned the trade and worked his way up to being a superintendent. Back in the day, Karl's grandfather would call his project superiors to check up on his grandson's efforts. Grandpa Woody was proud to hear Karl was succeeding - working every day and every task - with a sense of urgency. In those early years, he'd tell Karl, "Work hard! And what you lack in knowledge, make up (for it) in hustle!"

Karl is proud to carry on his family tradition and work ethic. Each project is a pleasure for him, from start to finish.

"To see a team work together, have coordination and progress on a daily basis, all with the ultimate goal of a 110% satisfied project owner - I love it!" said Karl. My grandfather's legacy motivates me - I hope he is looking down on all of our Harris projects and beaming. I always want him to be proud of me, and of the entire Harris team."

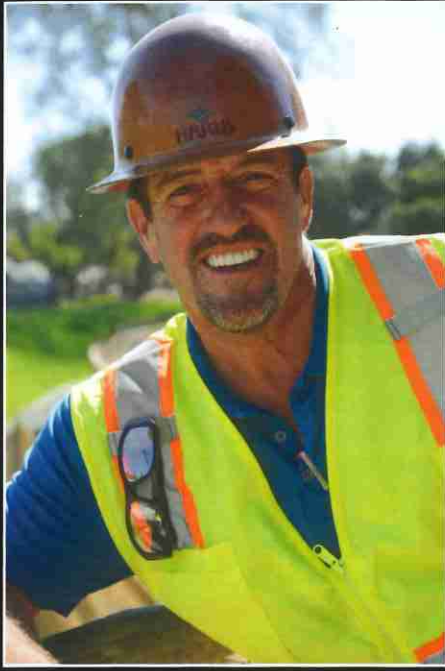
Karl enjoys every project from beginning to end. "When I work on a school facility, the satisfaction of the teachers, children - their pride of ownership reinforces it all for me. We make people happy - what a great job we have. Even building the African Adventure at Fresno Chaffee Zoo... a giraffe was actually born on our active jobsite! I saw elephants meeting each other for the first time - and wallowing in the mud pits our team created. Seeing lions play on the very rocks and grass that our subcontractors built... That makes for some pretty special days on a jobsite for sure!"

**Each Harris employee has an interesting story.** One of the newest additions to the team is Chris Frasca. As a Marine Corps corporal, he was deployed to Iraq for sixteen months, became wounded, was awarded the Purple Heart and was eventually medically discharged. Upon his return to the States, he attended a family reunion, where Harris employee Cameron Nelson told Frasca about the "Helmets to Hardhats" organization. Its program helps Veterans transition into a career in construction. Nelson followed his ask by saying, "...That is, if you're interested in working hard!"

That's when Frasca realized that his life and military skills were a perfect match for a construction career: Showing up on time; being responsible, thinking, being the hardest working guy in the group. He joined the Carpenters Union as an apprentice soon after the reunion, and within two weeks he was on the job helping the Harris team build a dairy processing facility.

Frasca was diagnosed with PTSD in the past, but has no problems with it now. He credits his construction work as one of the best things to help overcome it.

"Construction keeps me busy, productive; it keeps me going - and on a straight path - I always enjoy the people, the thinking, and the hard work - it's like my own kind of therapy. 'Helmets to Hardhats' was a perfect transition for me," said Frasca. "It's been 18 months since I became a carpenter



Meet Karl Cumbie, Chris Frascosa, and Courtney Miller as they explain how construction has touched each of their lives.

apprentice. I find the experience surreal and so rewarding... to see a project that was just a dirt field a year ago, that is now a giant building... Sometimes I can't believe I have the skills to build such an interesting and massive structure."

**Another Harris employee took a much different route to become a part of the Harris team.** Courtney Miller knew as a youngster that she wanted to be an architect, not a carpenter like her dad and grandpa. She took drafting classes, woodshop, construction ROP and more, surviving the ridicule of being the lone female in most of her classes. But one fateful day, her dad stopped by a Harris Construction jobsite and left her in the job trailer while he met with the superintendent on the job. A woman working in the Harris trailer named Ginny Paxton struck up a conversation with the young girl. Paxton explained what Construction work was like and how she herself had worked her way up from a laborer to a project manager. Paxton and her husband (a construction estimator at Harris at the time) were both already into their second decade as Harris employees. Paxton said to the young Miller, "When you turn 16, come be an intern with me – you'll get a real taste of being in construction."

After Miller's 16th birthday, she took Paxton up on her offer. As an intern, Miller saw the day-to-day work and the subcontractor/architect/owner interactions with the Harris project team. Paxton gave Miller the chance she promised her; a great opportunity for experience and exposure to the industry.

Miller reminisces, "Even though I had my heart set on being an architect, the time with Ginny and the Harris team made me fall in love with construction instead. Surprisingly it was a very quick transition and I was hooked!"

Miller went on to attend CSU Fresno, earning a BS in Construction Management through the Lyles School of Engineering. She also became president of the international

construction honor society, Sigma Lambda Chi's student chapter in Fresno. She joined Harris Construction in 2005, and is currently a proud and talented project engineer on a large Harris jobsite in Tracy, California. Yet she still finds time each week to get back to town to coach Fresno State's construction student team in national pre-construction competitions for the Associated Schools of Construction.

Miller's advice to other women: If you've got the moxie to stay strong and be smart in a group of men, then construction might be for you. She sees large construction firms who are always on the lookout for strong, smart women. She loves her job because it always changes, there's always a new project and a new owner, and a new team brought together to build it. She's never bored, and she loves being able to wear boots and jeans to work every day!

Miller's previous Harris project was the Orange Cove High School stadium, which was finished earlier this year. "The students and teachers were so thankful that we built such a great stadium for them. The community loved our work, they believed in us through the whole process, and to see the smiles and tears - those kids were so happy and proud of the stadium that we built for them. We have the best job in the world – making project owners and users incredibly happy. I love that about my job."

**So, the next time you're driving by a beautiful building, or you're in a bank, school, or downtown, pause for a moment to take it all in.** Think about the architects who designed them, and the craftspeople, back office and construction team that worked so hard to take a few drawings and ideas and bring them to life for the rest of the world to enjoy for decades to come. Hats off to the generations of quality tradespeople and office staff, at Harris Construction and everywhere, for building our Valley's legacies.