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Mike Ehrler, 29

Owner, Fieldstone Products LLC

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Growing up on a dairy cow and hog farm in rural Wisconsin helped Michael Ehrler forge a tough work ethic and daring attitude that he parlayed into a successful business.

Ehrler is owner of Fieldstone Products LLC. The Kirkwood-based company, which projects revenue of about \$1.3 million this year, specializes in installing cultured stone facing in residential buildings.

Ehrler started Fieldstone almost on a whim, with a small amount of capital he borrowed from his family and no real business plan. That was in 2000, a few months after he moved to the area after graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire with a bachelor's degree in human resources management. He'd come to work for Pioneer Construction Inc., a local company that specializes in residential and commercial construction.

"I only lasted two months (at Pioneer) before I knew I wanted to do something else," Ehrler recalled in a recent interview. "I was 23 and I was hungry."

The work Ehrler was initially doing at Pioneer involved construction of wooden frames for buildings. Many of the company's clients, he noticed, were interested in homes with cultured stone facing on the exterior and interior, but Pioneer wasn't particularly keen to deal with the material and preferred to outsource the work to other contractors.

Cultured stone is an artificial product made from concrete and shaped and colored to look and feel like real stone. The material comes in 2-inch thick slabs of different sizes and requires a lot of labor to install, which is the reason many contractors avoid it, Ehrler said.

Nick Raineri, president of Raineri Construction Products in Eureka, said Ehrler is successful largely because he is a hands-on entrepreneur, who cares for customers and always pays his material suppliers on time.

Raineri, whose company supplies building materials, said Fieldstone Products is in a very competitive industry, but Ehrler retains good customers and wins new ones by paying careful attention to delivering good service. Raineri said he knows of a time Ehrler slept overnight in a car, at a construction site in Iowa, to ensure a Fieldstone crew began work on a project on time.

To start Fieldstone, Ehrler said he first learned how to install cultured stone from a journeyman mason. He also read as much as he could about the material, registered Fieldstone as a limited liability company in Missouri and started bidding on stone installation jobs all over the country.

Ehrler's parents, Chuck and Sue Ehrler, who still live and run their farm in Cobb, Wisc., supported his idea. His aunt and uncle Elaine and Joe Leibold, who live in the St. Louis area, also urged Ehrler on and lent him a little seed money to pursue his entrepreneurial dream.

Within a month after forming Fieldstone, Ehrler landed a \$600,000 contract in Lexington, Ky., from Pioneer, his former employer. To do the work, he went back home to Cobb and found a few childhood friends who were interested in helping him. He hired the friends, rented them an apartment in Kentucky and taught them how to work with cultured stone.

That first contract took about a year for Ehrler to complete and he's had steady work since. Fieldstone Products now has eight full-time employees, including Sherry Pitcher, Ehrler's fiancé, who recently joined him to help with sales at the company. The company recently opened a 2,500-square-foot showroom at 104 N. Kirkwood Road.

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