

UTILITY AND TRANSPORTATION CONTRACTOR

October 2016



Robert A Briant, Sr.
Memorial Award



Presented to
Joe Walsh

In recognition of the selection as
recipient of this annual award which is
presented to the association member who
best represents the character and dedication
to the association of Robert A. Briant, Sr.



Presented by the Board of Directors
Utility and Transportation
Contractors Association of New Jersey
October 1, 2016

Featured Article



ASPEN LANDSCAPING CONTRACTING CELEBRATES 20 YEARS IN BUSINESS

By: Anthony Attanasio, Executive Director

Twenty years ago, Maria Fuentes was an executive at Motorola and her husband Don was a decorated Police Officer at the Westfield Police Department. Twenty years ago, Maria and Don didn't know much about bid strategies and local plant purchase mandates. Then again, twenty years ago, Maria and Don Fuentes had no idea that they were about to put everything on the line and embark upon what has become their own journey toward the American Dream.

Maria Fuentes grew up around landscaping. Her father had a business in the residential sector, and she came to see there was emerging opportunity in the public sector; so in 1996, Maria upended life as she knew it and founded Aspen Landscaping Contracting. Through hard work, perseverance, and sheer strength of will, Maria masterfully shepherded the fledgling company through those lean early years. Her efforts paid off, and this year marks two decades as a successful commercial landscaping firm in the construction industry.

In 1996, when Maria embarked on what has become a 20-year journey, she never imagined that Aspen Landscaping Contracting would become the success story you are reading about today. Aspen now has 40 full time employees and grows to 100 during the landscaping seasons. They are a 100 percent union contractor employing laborers, operating engineers, teamsters and plumbers, and consider their working relationships with Laborers Local 472 and Operating Engineers 825 to be more like partnerships. Aspen works solely in the public sector with a lion's share of their work in recent years taking place in the five boroughs of New York. They work on projects for a variety of Government Agencies in both states, including upstate NY, the five boroughs, the NY and NJ Department of Transportation, Turnpike Authorities, educational institutions, municipalities, and counties.

This is quite a departure from the late nights in 1996 when Maria would stay up calculating and retooling bid numbers in search of her first public contract. Maria was the chief, cook, and bottle washer in the early days of Aspen Landscaping. She tried many different techniques to hone her bidding skills while waiting for her first big break. It took quite a leap of faith and a significant investment to start the business. In order to meet prequalification standards for many of the public agencies, Aspen was required to own, not rent, a hydro-seeder and a straw mulch blower. At the time, this equipment cost \$125,000, which was a daunting number since the house Maria and Don owned at the time was only worth \$250,000. They continued to submit bids without success, and the equipment sat in a rented lot as a daily reminder of the enormous risk the couple had taken to make a go at the business.



Maria and Don Fuentes are pictured in the Aspen Offices.



In Camden where Aspen built a channel and then planted thousands of wetland plants to stabilize and conserve the wetlands.

Ultimately, the company began subbing for several contractors and began to build a reputation as a reliable and dedicated subcontractor. Aspen's first big job at the time, a \$350,000 contract for Mt. Hope Rock Products, Inc., seemed too good to be true, but sure enough, Union Paving came calling shortly after that and gave Aspen a \$1.2 million subcontract on the Route 21 project in Passaic City. The sudden jump in contract size meant the company needed to grow, and needed to grow fast. Fortunately, they were able to enroll in a business-mentoring program and were paired up with a building contractor (Torcon) and a highway contractor (Anselmi & DeCicco). To this day, Maria and Don credit Henry Meyers for playing a critical role in their company's ability to adapt to its early rapid growth. In addition to Union Paving and Anselmi & DeCicco, over the years Aspen has been proud to perform work as a subcontractor for many of UTCA's largest and most active members including Ferreira Construction, Crisdel, J. Fletcher Creamer & Sons, Railroad Construction and Northeast Remsco to name a few. Maria and Don are quick to point out that working with all of these contractors helped them learn and grow.

As the company continued to expand as a subcontractor and take on larger projects, Maria and Don learned about a new program being rolled out by the NJDOT called Roadside Rehabilitation. The program presented Aspen with the opportunity to perform landscaping for the NJDOT as a prime contractor. They knew immediately that this could be a key to the company's success, and they set out to secure their first prime contract. The first job they won was a nail biter. Maria stayed up until 3 AM reviewing, tweaking, and crunching numbers. She was so tired in the morning that she gave the bid package to Don and had him go for the bid opening. When bids were opened, Aspen Landscaping had won a \$1.3 million contract on Route 78, coming in just \$20,000 under

the next lowest bidder. The company had an excellent Resident Engineer who helped them every step of the way as they worked through the growing pains of becoming a prime contractor. Aspen successfully completed the contract, and went on to win several more Landscaping Prime contracts, which earned the company a reputation as one of the premier landscaping contractors in New Jersey. All of this success enabled Aspen to graduate the New Jersey Department of Transportation's Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) program. It was at this time that Don retired from the Police Force and joined the company.

When looking back at their 20 years in business, Maria and Don are proud of the work they have done and the struggles they have overcome. As Don puts it, "Everything seemed so big and massive in the beginning. As you complete each job and grow, one project becomes hundreds of projects completed. The view becomes less in size and you get more confident. It can get emotional as we drive through the State by all of our completed projects."

Several projects stand out as particular points of pride. Their work at major universities like the SUNY campuses where they built more than 17 rooftop green roof systems, as well as a major project completed at the Hoboken Waterfront for the Port Authority of NY & NJ. Aspen successfully planted more than 15,000 trees for Crisdel as part of the New Jersey Turnpike widening program. The next time you are across the river in New York City, stop by Union Square Park for a delightful respite. As you look around, know that Aspen Landscaping rehabilitated the entire park, creating one of the more beautiful places in the entire city. Finally, when taking in the majesty of the 9/11 Memorial, know that Maria and Don's company played a role in the landscaping that helps make the Memorial so breathtaking.



Aspen crews, saw cutting the roadway, installing 8" main water pipe and then installing irrigation followed by landscaping in Central Park NYC.



Aspen crew digging and burlapping a 14" zelkova tree, transported to Bryant Park then transplanted in the park.

Aspen's success did not come easy, and a few of those early struggles persist to this day. Some of the biggest challenges they face are prompt payment as a subcontractor, identifying quality plant material that meets contract specifications, guaranteeing their work, and an often-unreliable market in New Jersey. When prime contractors are slow to pay for work completed, cash flow becomes an issue. Maria points out that New York and New Jersey handle this issue quite differently and prompt payment is much more standard operating procedure in the five boroughs.

Another constant challenge is finding quality plant material that is reasonably priced and available within a practical distance from their projects. Beyond the very specific types and sizes of plant materials, some agencies also require that plants and trees be purchased within a 200-mile radius of a project. However, due to the variable availability of necessary plants, this is not always feasible. Some nurseries have taken up the practice of buying their plant material from other parts of the country and selling the plant material at their nurseries to qualify within the 200-mile radius, which costs more to purchase when the material is grown outside the 200 miles and delivered locally.

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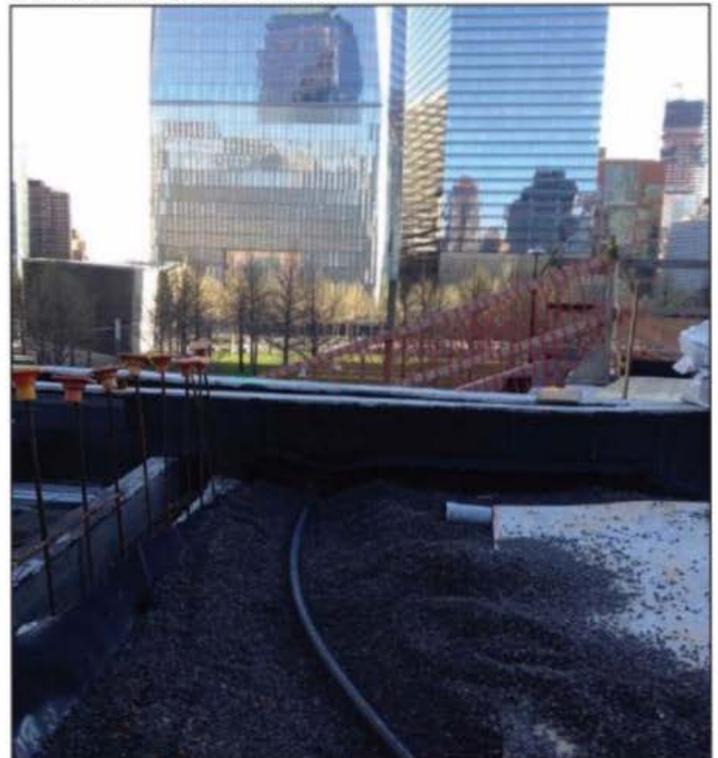
- Don Fuentes

Aspen stands by its work and will replace any plant material that fail to survive. Aspen guarantees a plant for 1-5 years, depending on the contract, regardless of whether drought, extreme heat, or some other factor out of their control causes the plants to fail. A particular business practice that Maria and Don take great pride in is that every contractor they work for knows that they can count on Aspen for 100% of the necessary replacements, regardless of cost and the retainage value withheld.

Finally, the market itself and lack of consistency in New Jersey has proven to be a great challenge for the company. About three quarters of Aspen's workload is outside of New Jersey, a majority of which takes place in the five boroughs. They have also begun working in Philadelphia and Delaware. As New Jersey, and NJ-DOT specifically, have become unreliable for steady work while also having the strictest contract specifications which Maria does not see changing any time soon. When discussing the challenges they face on a daily basis Don says, "This business can be tougher at times than my days on the force when I was in the narcotics unit!"

Even with these challenges, the future is bright for the Fuentes family. As Maria put it, "We have achieved success beyond our wildest dreams. We are proud to be a part of this industry that impacts our home state so much. We are humbly thankful for all the opportunities that General Contractors that build this State's infrastructure have and continue to give Aspen a chance to work as a subcontractor for their firms. Service is our top priority and will always be along with our integrity that we consider the most important of all."

Maria and Don credit much of their success to their involvement in the industry associations. Maria serves as a Board Member on the Heavy, Highway & Utility Division of the AGC and Don is very active in the UTCA. In fact, Don has brought home more UTCA Scholarship Sporting Clay Shoot trophies (both team and individual shooter) than almost any other participant has since UTCA began hosting its bi-annual clay shoot several years ago. Both Maria and Don appreciate UTCA's news updates and find the Association is constantly in the thick of it on major issues that affect the industry. Aspen's goal is to be a leader in the green industry for many years to come and looks forward to continuing their wonderful journey. We wish them nothing but continued success for the next 20 years and beyond.



Liberty Park at the World Trade Center roof top where Aspen installed a specialized irrigation system and placed hundreds of cubic yards of light weight soil on the 13th floor before being planted. Overlooking previously planted trees.