

TAMPA BAY Business Journal

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Jim Shimberg wanted to be a baseball player when he was growing up.
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THREE DOLLARS

Facing hostile **economy** Bast **ascends** step by step

It diversifies product, taps talent to stay competitive

BY DANIELLE RANDALL
STAFF WRITER

TAMPA—Bast Flooring Co. prides itself on being a big small business with a history in wood that's as old as some of the wood it has put to work.

Pride in tradition notwithstanding, a competitive marketplace prompted the company to focus on constructing customized staircases as a stand-alone service about four years ago. Previously, it constructed staircases only as part of a package deal with the installation or refinishing of floors.

Now, with all things residential in a downturn, Bast has cut its workforce to a total of 40 this year from 50 workers in 2005 and 2004. The company has opted to work with more subcontractors and has further diversified its product offering into the tile business in an effort to mitigate risk.

HISTORY AND MOVING ON

The relationship between wood and Bast family members started in Kentucky and now spans more than 85 years. It began with great grandfather Henry Bast as a laborer of a traveling company that installed gymnasiums and civic centers, among other large commercial projects. The floor installation trade was passed to John Thomas Bast Sr., who retired in Florida.

Restless in Tampa, Bast busied himself with installing and refinishing hardwood floors and learned the area, along with South Florida, was an untapped land of business opportunities. It wasn't long before he dialed up his son, John T. Bast Jr., and son-in-law Gary L. Newcom to relocate to Tampa to set up shop.

In February of 1987, Bast Hardwood Floors was created. The family-run business became a prominent hardwood floor player, only to learn the market had become crowded with similar family-run businesses and a retailer, Home Depot, that provides a cheaper alternative to hardwood floors using laminates and other materials.

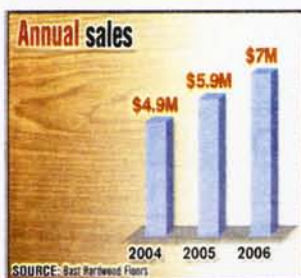
BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

When Bast saw the demand for staircases, it tapped the tradesmen on staff to provide the niche service. It also didn't hurt that Controller Melissa Johnson's husband, Matthew T. Johnson, is a staircase expert. He is VP of Bast and heads up its growing staircase division.

"You can buy floors in Home Depot's 'do it yourself' section, but staircases cannot be done on your own," Melissa Johnson said.



Craftsman Donald Klink manufactures custom handrail parts at Bast.



A staircase could be as much a utilitarian and as much a showpiece, Matt Johnson said, noting that the craftsmen have creative souls and talent that are extended into staircases and its banisters.

Material brings skill to life

Bast Hardwood Floors taps a number of Florida companies for an array of wood, including red oak, cherry wood and even rare heart pine.

When it comes to true antique heart pine, many clients want something reminiscent of childhood memories. For this, Bast has relied on Goodwin Lumber, a Micanopy company known for its river recovering efforts.

Heart pine, heavily used in the construction of homes in the late 19th century, was transported through rivers. Some of the logs would sink, making river recovering of heart pine logs a lucrative business for Goodwin, said co-founder Carol Goodwin, co-founder.

—Danielle Randall

Matt Johnson, Chris Newcom and Remiah Newton collectively head up the tile business.

Of Bast's \$7 million in annual revenue for its most recent fiscal year, 5 percent was in its new tile business. Tiles represented 3 percent of its first quarter sales.

Bast recently priced tiling an indoor concrete staircase on Davis Islands that meets a hardwood floor, Newcom said, pointing out that all materials can come together in one structure.

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