



## 'It matters how you get there'

Erhardt Construction has 50 years under its belt to prove it. **DAVID CZURAK**

The company that directed the construction of Van Andel Arena, DeVos Place, Van Andel Institute, Plaza Towers and Amway Grand Plaza Hotel Tower — arguably the five most noteworthy buildings downtown — began as a two-person firm in the basement of a tri-level home.

It was 1962 when Larry Erhardt Sr. started Erhardt Construction with a single employee, opening an office in what had been a playroom for his kids. His first job wasn't all that attention-getting: He laid the concrete foundation for a water tower on the Allendale campus of a two-year-old Grand Valley State University.

Fifty years later, though, Larry Erhardt's vision and core business values affirm the success of a highly respected builder and general contracting firm that is celebrating its golden anniversary in a few weeks. "Initially, it was very small. For 15 years, it grew from nothing. It got a little bit bigger each year," said Joe Erhardt, Larry's son and company chairman and CEO.

The first big splash Erhardt Construction made in the market took place in 1978 with its work on the Calder Plaza Building, still a Class A office structure at 250 Monroe Ave. NW. Then the growing business had an epiphany — a single, eye-opening event that acknowledged it had arrived. Joe Erhardt said that moment came in 1980, when the firm built the 27-story tower for the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel on a tight footprint, with the Grand River forming the property's west boundary. "The building is only 100 feet square," he said.

But high-profile downtown

commercial structures aren't the company's only claim to fame. It's also completed a good number of lower-profile but equally important municipal projects over its timeline. For instance, Erhardt made key improvements last year to the wastewater treatment plant in Big Rapids, which the Michigan Chapter of the American Public Works Association named its top project for 2011. Its award-winning municipal run began in 1993 when the American Society of Civil Engineers recognized the company for the Lake Michigan Filtration Plant that provides much of West Michigan with drinking water.

The firm also has done work for nonprofit organizations over the years. Most recently, the Grand Valley Chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave Erhardt its prestigious Honor Award last year for construction of the Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center.

Today, Erhardt Construction employs 50 builders, staff personnel and LEED-accredited professionals. The company has long committed to diversity, as evidenced by the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce naming it Minority Business Advocate of the year in 2009. That was the same year the Michigan Construction Hall of Fame gave its Distinguished Constructor Award to Larry Erhardt.

Joe Erhardt has been with the company for more than 30 years, having started in 1981 as a college student attending Michigan Technological University in Houghton. President Ben Wickstrom joined the firm 14 years ago and took over daily operations last year when Joe moved into the chairman's



THE BRAINTRUST at Erhardt Construction includes, from left, Joe Erhardt, Ben Wickstrom and Larry Erhardt Sr., shown here in one of their signature projects, DeVos Place. *Photo by Dickson Bank*

seat to spend more time focusing on the company's strategies and client relations.

Both told the Business Journal that the reason for Erhardt Construction's growth, awards and longevity is because it has adhered to the core business values Larry Erhardt established in his basement. Those values can be summed up as listening to a client's needs and expectations, engaging in a dialogue that explores those wishes and then delivering a quality project.

Both said clients have always come first and always will. But Joe Erhardt pointed out that every conversation with each customer will be candid because that is how the company feels a good building project is created. "It matters how you get there," added Wickstrom.

To celebrate its golden anniversary, Erhardt Construction established a competition called "Building Our Community" in May as a way to say thanks for the support it received the past five decades.

The company put \$50,000 into the promotion and recruited 24 subcontractors and construction-supply firms as partners, sponsors and supporters to be a part of it.

"They're very important. We wouldn't have been able to do this without them," said Wickstrom.

The contest was opened to nonprofits in Kent and Ottawa counties; the grand prize winner will receive a free construction or remodeling project worth \$45,000. Four runners-up will receive cash donations totaling \$5,000. The winners are being chosen by the public through an online vote.

"We decided what better way to give back than by the giving of our expertise and our skills and do what we do best, which is build things for these charities. It's a way for us to give back and say thank you to the community that supported us for 50 years," said Wickstrom.

The first round of voting delivered more than 84,000 votes and determined the five finalists.

The second round of voting — at [erhardtcc.com/community](http://erhardtcc.com/community) — will decide the winner. (See related story.)

"As we look back on our timeline and some of the projects we've done from early on through the high-profile downtown work — the convention center, the arena, the institute, Plaza Towers, the hotel — we, of course, see our growth as a company," said Wickstrom. "But more importantly, we see our growth and success as a community, as a city and as a region, and at the core of this we recognize that those two things really go hand-in-hand. If we grow and succeed as a community, we're going to grow and succeed as a business."

Company officials decided to let the public select the finalists and, ultimately, the winner because there are a lot of worthy nonprofit organizations in both counties. The website shows the vote count on a real-time basis, ex-

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### BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY

The five nonprofit organizations in Erhardt Construction's 50th anniversary competition vying for a free \$45,000 construction or remodeling project and cash donations totaling \$5,000 are:

- **Camp Roger.** A summer camp that expresses Christian values and serves 1,500 youngsters each season in Rockford.
- **Crash's Landing.** It provides a home, food and veterinary care to stray cats throughout greater Grand Rapids until a permanent home is found.
- **San Juan Diego Academy.** It's a K-8 Catholic school that serves the educational needs of immigrant families in Wyoming.
- **St. Alphonsus Parish Food and Clothing Center.** It has provided food and clothing to the needy for 40 years from the northeast side of Grand Rapids. This past year it handed out 27 tons of food.
- **Women At Risk, International.** It's an organization that fights against the trafficking of humans and serves as a place of refuge and help for those in need in Wyoming.

The public can vote for its choice through Aug. 17 by going online to [erhardtcc.com/community](http://erhardtcc.com/community).

Source: Erhardt Construction, July 2012.

**Head of the class**  
NAI Wisinski sells an amazing number of school buildings in a short amount of time.

13 ►►

**Boilerplate burn**  
When it comes to contracts, what you don't read can hurt you.

15 ►►

**Boards and shutters**  
The vacancy rate in West Michigan's retail market goes up a bit.

16 ►►

“By formalizing the relationship, we can draw on each other's expertise. GMB is hungry to grow and has an incredible reputation for getting things done.”

WAYNE VISBEEN, PAGE 14





