

Orchard Commercial's Joe Lewis tries to do good with business, life

BY BECKY BERGMAN
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Joe Lewis says he uses a team structure and makes sure that all staff feel included and important at Orchard Commercial Property Management.

View Larger Stationed in Moffett Field in Sunnyvale, Joe Lewis was wrapping up a seven-year stint in the U.S. Navy in 1980 when he began contemplating his future. His options were to stay in the Silicon Valley area or return home to his family's 100-acre farm in Tennessee, where he grew up.

Fueled by a sense of adventure and a yearning to do something challenging, Lewis opted to stay in the valley and pursue a career in commercial real estate.

For nearly three decades, Lewis has worked in commercial realty in the region.

Today he is president and owner of San Jose-based Orchard Commercial Property Management, and in his life has drawn strength and inspiration from his Christian background, triumph over personal challenges and the various achievements he scored throughout his career.

The real estate exec also relies heavily on a team structure that includes making all the staff members feel included and important about their role in the company's success.

"When he has the potential to acquire a new client, he includes different key people in the meetings so everyone is on the same page," says Petra Skinner, who has worked as an administrative assistant for Lewis for the past 11 years.

"He doesn't wait until he wins the contract before he gets everyone involved," says Skinner. "Because he does that, everyone feels like they're always working on the same team."

Skinner, who calls Lewis "a down-to-earth person," says employees feel comfort-

JOE LEWIS

Company: Orchard Commercial Property Management

Title: Owner and president.

Age: 60

Born: Lexington, Tenn.

Education: Bachelor of Science, Lambuth University in Jackson, Tenn.; Master of Science from Murray State University in Murray, Ky.

Experience: 16 years at Cornish & Carey Commercial in Santa Clara and 11 years at Orchard Commercial Property Management, which he purchased in 2000.

Residence: Atherton.

Family: Wife of 15 years, Elizabeth; They each have two children from previous marriages and together, four grandchildren.

Essential business philosophy: This is not just business, it is our life. Do some good with it.

Best business decision: Buying Orchard Commercial.

Toughest business decision: Hiring and firing team members.



Dennis G. Hendricks

able about approaching the exec regardless if it is a professional or personal issue.

"He has an open door policy and wants people to feel at ease with him," she says.

Lewis joined the company in 1996 and later purchased the property management arm of Orchard when founder David Brown retired to Colorado in 2000. At its peak a year later, the company leased more than 1.06 million square feet in 67 separate transactions during a 12-month period.

A year after he purchased the company, the tech fallout dumped thousands of square feet of space back onto the market as companies went bankrupt and unloaded their leases, says Lewis, who diversified the company and started offering HVAC and construction management services.

Today, the full-service property management company employs 45 workers who oversee marketing, leasing, construction

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and financial services for 125 buildings comprised of six million square feet.

"Working with Joe is a lot of fun because he has incredible depth of knowledge about the market and a great perspective of what's going on," says Duncan Walker, vice president of INVESCO Realty Advisors.

"When I talk to him versus other people who are focused on a particular thing about the market or property, he tends to look at everything in context of history and the whole picture, which is helpful," Walker says.

Orchard is currently managing the Bayshore Plaza on North First Street for Walker's company.

LEWIS: He believes the industry is about an upswing and the company will prosper

Tough times

Lewis, 60, believes the industry is at the brink of an upswing and says he has faith the company will continue to prosper.

It's easy to dismiss Lewis' warm and fuzzy outtake as a form of denial or even mockery given the current real estate market. But the exec is familiar with economic downturns and topsy-turvy trends.

In fact, Lewis launched his career at by landing a coveted job at Cornish & Carey Commercial in Santa Clara during the early 1980s recession when — as he fondly recalls now — desperate times required men in dresses.

"We were working with AMB Property Corporation and times were bad," says Lewis. "After a tenant went bankrupt, we had a difficult time leasing the 100,000 square foot warehouse space in San Francisco. The guy I worked with at AMB promised to wear a woman's dress if we could just lease the building."

Lewis says he moved quickly to close the deal with American Tire Co.

"We met at a downtown bar in San Francisco and sure enough, he walked in with the dress on," says Lewis. "Those were dark days but that was great."

Lewis ultimately worked his way up to senior vice president and later director of Asset Management at Cornish & Carey Commercial. There, he was responsible for building the property management portfolio from less than 500,000 to more than 3 million square feet under management.

In 1987, Lewis received the Silicon Valley Investment Broker of the Year Award from the Association of South Bay Brokers and the Metropolitan San Jose Chamber of Commerce in 1988.

Instead of basking in the glow of his success, Lewis, then 40, faced his biggest challenge yet as he battled a life-threatening form of cancer.

A devout Christian since childhood, Lewis says the experience humbled him even more and gave him a greater appreciation for life.

He underwent 18 months of chemotherapy

where he lost 30 pounds and all his hair. Worried he would die, he began to reflect on life and develop a different outlook to living.

Lewis, the only son of Depression-era born Southern parents — his father was a farmer and his mother was the first woman in Henderson County to graduate from college — has a clean bill of health today.

Remarried 15 years ago to Elizabeth, a homebuilder in Silicon Valley that he met through Cornish & Carey friends, Lewis says he is grateful to be alive and spends most of his free time with his wife and their four children and four grandchildren.

"To find a match this great in mid-life..." Lewis pauses. "I'm so lucky to have a wonderful wife."

Reflecting on more of his life, Lewis says, "I hope I can have a great impact on everything I touch and everything I do. I hope the world can be a better place because of something I did."

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