



THE NAME YOU CAN TRUST

For *Tapani Inc.*, People Make the Difference

by Tracy Torma

In 1983, when Iner Tapani went home to tell his wife, Beverly, he had been laid off from his union operator job at an underground utility company, she met him at the front door with even bigger news: she was pregnant with twins (children numbers nine and ten).

Iner borrowed \$3,000 from his father, bought a backhoe and began installing residential septic systems and doing any other work that could be found during the bleak economic climate of the mid-1980s. His strong work ethic and conservative fiscal management helped build *Tapani Underground Inc.* (now *Tapani Inc.*) into a multimillion-dollar heavy civil contracting business serving Oregon and Washington.

Family-owned and operated, Tapani's expertise ranges from transportation and heavy highway construction to commercial and residential development, environmental restoration

and structural concrete. Since 2011, the company, headquartered in Battle Ground, Washington, has tripled in size and today has 450 employees.

A HUMBLE BEGINNING

Leigh Tapani, one of Iner's six sons who are co-owners in the business, says the firm's humble beginnings laid the foundations for its current success. "My dad would drive the backhoe to a job and mom would follow him in the morning and pick him up in the evening. It was a very competitive marketplace. During the recession of the 1980s, the company was hit hard like everyone else. But dad ran the business very conservatively and our balance sheet was healthy. It positioned us to come out the other side in better shape than most," he says.

In 1985, Tapani won the bid for the company's first public works project. Toward the end of the 1980s, the company completed a breakthrough project for the city of Battle Ground.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAPANI INC. / OWEN SARKINEN

At Tapani Inc.'s Columbia Palisades project in Camas, Washington, an operator loads blasted rock into a portable jaw crusher. Oversized boulders too large for the jaw are stacked in front.



With Iner's philosophy of reinvesting earnings back into the business, as time went on, equity in the business continued to grow and improve. "One job led to another," recalls Leigh, who, starting at age 12, worked after school and summers at the family business he would join full time upon graduating from high school in 1991. Today, he serves as company president.

As the business grew, the company's services diversified and expanded to more areas in the construction industry. The family changed the business name from Tapani Underground Inc. to Tapani Inc.

Today, the company's excavation and grading work ranges from mass excavation covering acres of land to private subdivisions of any size. Expert pipe crews have installed hundreds of miles of storm drainage, sanitary sewer, water and irrigation piping. Tapani has built multimillion-dollar highway projects, too.

Its environmental work includes streambed, streambank and floodplain restoration and wetland mitigation. The company's work on the Curtin Creek Enhancement Area, a 36-acre site at the headwaters of Curtin Creek, northeast of Vancouver, was voted the American Public Works Association Washington State 2011 Project of the Year in the Environmental, Less Than \$5 Million category.

The company's structural work includes million-plus-gallon storage tanks, fish hatcheries, water diversion structures, storm vaults, reservoirs and assistance with wastewater treatment plants.

The diversity of its jobs enables the company to fluctuate with the marketplace. "We can move our resources around to different market segments," Leigh notes.

Representing a new milestone in project diversification, Tapani recently built powerhouses for a \$26.8 million



From left: President Leigh Tapani, Vice President Kevin Tapani, and Vice President and Business Unit Lead Tod Tapani at the site of Vancouver's Waterfront Park project.



Vice President and Estimator Shane Tapani in his office at Tapani Inc.'s headquarters in Battle Ground, Washington.

A Tapani Inc. crew performs utility trench installation for a sewer force main and pump station project in La Center, Washington, allowing the city to further develop the east side of Interstate 5.



hydroelectric project in a remote region in Washington. Between the two sites, both in unincorporated King County, the company excavated more than 250,000 cubic yards to allow for the installation of nearly 14,000 linear feet of 39-, 41- and 45-inch penstock piping down the rugged mountainous terrain to the powerhouses. The project included building two powerhouses to enclose the generation equipment and the water discharge passage. Each powerhouse had a complex concrete structure to divert flow to the hydro generator while still maintaining flow in the creek to preserve delicate fish life.

Tapani combined two business units with separate market-specific focuses—one grading and the other structural concrete work—to complete the job. “It was a successful, but challenging project, and our employees grew through the experience in terms of team building and technical skills,” says Leigh.

A FAMILY CULTURE

As the business has grown and broadened its services, one thing has continued to stay the same: the company’s family culture.

“We’re a large business with a family culture, which creates a sense of belonging for employees,” Leigh says. “Our success is their success. Our employees have an opportunity to grow in the business and have a fulfilling career. It’s more than just a job.”

Family-owned and operated, Tapani Inc.’s expertise ranges from transportation and heavy highway construction to commercial and residential development, environmental restoration and structural concrete.

Tapani Inc. excavates a 21-foot-tall gabion basket retaining wall for the city of Vancouver's \$9.9 million, 7.3-acre Waterfront Park.



“We're a large business with a family culture, which creates a sense of belonging for employees. Our success is their success.”

Leigh Tapani,
Co-owner and President,
Tapani Inc.

Leigh says that after the recession in 2008, the combination of a mature staff and a ready market aligned to enable the company to experience staggering growth, tripling in size from 2011 to 2016.

Tapani developed a vision and core values statement to stay true to its culture. “People are our greatest strength. When a company is small, you can exhibit your values and culture through everyday interaction. As a company grows, you don’t see employees on a daily basis. So we developed the mission and core values so that every new employee understands who we are and why the mission of the company is important. We conduct our performance reviews in alignment with our core values and mission, which keeps them alive,” explains Leigh.

In the mission and core values statement, “The People” tops the list of why Tapani is “The name you can TRUST,” followed by Reputation, Unity, Stability and Tapani’s Culture. To reinforce employee engagement, Tapani foremen, superintendents and project managers meet quarterly to discuss the future, and the company hosts an employee picnic each summer.

“We have an open culture with a lot of humility,” Leigh says. “While we have an organization chart for role clarification, everyone in the company has a voice. We appreciate it when employees engage and contribute every day.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In 2015, Iner Tapani retired from the company he founded, leaving a second generation in control of the business. The company just completed a 22,000-square-foot shop and fabrication facility, serving as general contractor and builder.

Today, Tapani has 65 active projects in the Pacific Northwest. In 2017, it successfully built a 7.3-acre waterfront development along the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington, and a major sewer line extension near Interstate 5 in La Center, Washington. The company also did site work for a 54-acre design-build postal facility for the U.S. Postal Service in Portland, Oregon.

With the family’s grandchildren joining the ranks, Leigh Tapani says he and his brothers are looking at what their third-generation ownership model will look like. “My goal for the business is to develop a model for perpetuity so the business exists long after I’m gone,” he concludes. 🐼

Tracy Torma of Torma Communications is a former newspaper reporter and now corporate journalist who specializes in writing, editing and publication production. She’s been telling people’s stories for more than 40 years.