
A CONCRETE FOUNDATION OF GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY

**Integrity and Honesty Yield Success for
*Grapevine Group Concrete Contractors, Inc.***

by Krystal-Rose Agu



**John Houchens, Co-owner and President of
Grapevine Group Concrete Contractors, Inc.**

In the 1960s and 1970s, John Houchens recognized that San Antonio was a close-knit community—a place where everyone knew each other and children felt safe enough to walk home from school. This is where he grew up, the youngest of eight children in a middle-class family.

Houchens was the type of kid who enjoyed the outdoors and baseball. With five sisters and two brothers, he spent his youth looking up to his siblings. When his sisters brought home their dates to meet the family, he was fascinated to learn about the hands-on careers of these young men. One, he remembers, made a living as a truck driver; another worked for a construction company.

In 1978, Houchens attended Abilene Christian University on an athletic scholarship. A year later he transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, but never obtained a degree. Rather, he left in 1981 in hopes of getting a jumpstart on finding a viable job to pay the bills.

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He became a sales operation representative in Corpus Christi for a garbage collection company in 1982. Next, Houchens began working a desk job in Dallas in 1983, creating reports for the marketing department of AT&T Advance Mobile Services. As someone who enjoyed being active and spending time outdoors, he soon realized that marketing was not the right fit for him.

AT&T transferred him to San Antonio in 1984. But he left the position a year later to work at a concrete pumping company where he learned about the concrete construction business.

As a jack-of-all-trades—and as someone with an entrepreneurial bent—Houchens began a trucking business in 1987, and he continued to do concrete work for friends on the side.

A decade later he went through a two-year divorce. He had to sell all assets in his trucking business, his car and many of his possessions to pay for the resulting debt. “After the divorce, I had nothing,” Houchens says.

During that time, he had been attending St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church in San Antonio. There, he found the opportunity to focus on his faith and the values of truth and integrity. His benevolent church group gave him a two-door Toyota Tercel to help him transition

out of that difficult time in his life. Soon after, Houchens met his wife Brenda, who works as a bookkeeper at the church.

GROWING LIKE A GRAPEVINE

The couple married in 2002, and that same year founded a concrete construction company, Grapevine Group Concrete Contractors, Inc., in San Antonio. They gained inspiration for the company’s name from John 15:1-5, a metaphorical Bible passage.

The new business had humble beginnings. Houchens says he used Brenda’s Ford F-150 to haul materials and tools, visit with clients, and “for just about every part of the business.” Brenda continued her work at the church, her job vital to the family’s financial security. She also worked the books for the new

concrete company and offered help whenever needs arose.

Revenue gradually trickled in at Grapevine Group Concrete Contractors. In the beginning, each job brought in about \$2,000. Houchens eventually scraped up enough money to purchase a used vehicle for the business, a Ford F-350 with about 100,000 miles on it.

The flow of incoming jobs started to increase, and with that the business started picking up bigger projects. Currently, the company averages about \$10 million in annual revenue. Houchens attributes this success to his company’s core values of integrity and honesty, and choosing to take the high road when doing business to yield what’s best for clients and employees.

A SEASON OF PRUNING

In 2009, the Houchens’ lives were shaken when doctors diagnosed Brenda with breast cancer. “I was a mess,” Houchens says. “I was afraid I would lose my wife.”



The company operates in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas and New Mexico. A large percentage of its work takes place in the San Antonio, Austin, Houston and Corpus Christi markets.



John Houchens (left) visits every project site to form strong relationships with his clients.

He put his business on hold to make himself available to care for his wife. He was there for every test, surgery and chemotherapy session, and did his best to support Brenda to make sure she didn't feel alone or scared.

"At that point, focusing on the business was a secondary priority," Houchens says. "I was going to be there for my wife."

Each chemotherapy session brought Brenda terrible pain the next day. Houchens describes Brenda's experiences recovering from chemo as being close to death.

The mounting pressure of their circumstances threatened to overwhelm them. The couple clung to their Christian faith and somehow knew that everything was going to be

all right. Then, in 2011, doctors gave Brenda the all-clear—she no longer had cancer.

"When her oncologist came in and said 'fantastic news' ... it's hard to describe the excitement of it," Houchens shares. "It's almost like hearing 'now, your life begins again.'"

STRONGER THAN EVER

After his wife's recovery, Houchens picked up the business from where he left it and expanded Grapevine Group Concrete Contractors' work throughout South Texas and beyond. The company now operates in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas and New Mexico. A large percentage of its work takes place in the San Antonio, Austin, Houston and Corpus Christi markets.

Nowadays, the company's contracts range anywhere from \$100,000 to \$3 million and consist of commercial, industrial and multi-family projects. The business handles a variety of project needs, examples of which include installing concrete foundations and tilt-up wall panels, parking lot construction, concrete paving, placing monument sign footings/foundations, building retaining walls, and laying flat-work-sidewalks and curbs and gutters.

One of the company's major projects involved creating parking lot structures for the U.S. Border Patrol

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Station in Falfurrias, Texas. Other significant projects include the Franklin Park Sonterra senior and assisted living apartments, and work for Gardner Denver's division of petroleum and industrial pumps, both in San Antonio.

Houchens takes pride in the fact that his employees perform projects safely and correctly. Every member of his staff is OSHA certified, which means they uphold high safety precautions in the ways in which they perform work. Houchens uses continuing education opportunities to ensure the safety of his employees, and his company supports the industry's advancement through its membership with the American Society of Concrete Contractors.

The business owner also makes sure he visits each project site to form strong relationships with his clients. Houchens says he'd like to see his company grow more, but not at the expense of losing the personal feel the company has with its clients, vendors and employees.

When the time comes to retire from his professional career, Houchens hopes his legacy will be one built on

faith, family and of treating others with integrity. "I hope people will say 'he loved his wife and he was a great guy to work with,'" he says. 🐾



Today the company's contracts range anywhere from \$100,000 to \$3 million, and consist of commercial, industrial and multi-family projects. Shown here is a concrete tilt wall retail center project completed last year for Drash Contracting.

Author Bio: Krystal-Rose Agu is a Dallas/Fort Worth-based storyteller intrigued by built spaces. She aims to use her skills in multimedia communication to uniquely relay stories and promote sustainable living environments.