



2016 Hall of Fame

Double-digit growth, but still that family feel



Photo courtesy of LaBella Associates

Salvatore LaBella: "I always wanted to have the right kind of people on staff, people you could trust all the way through."

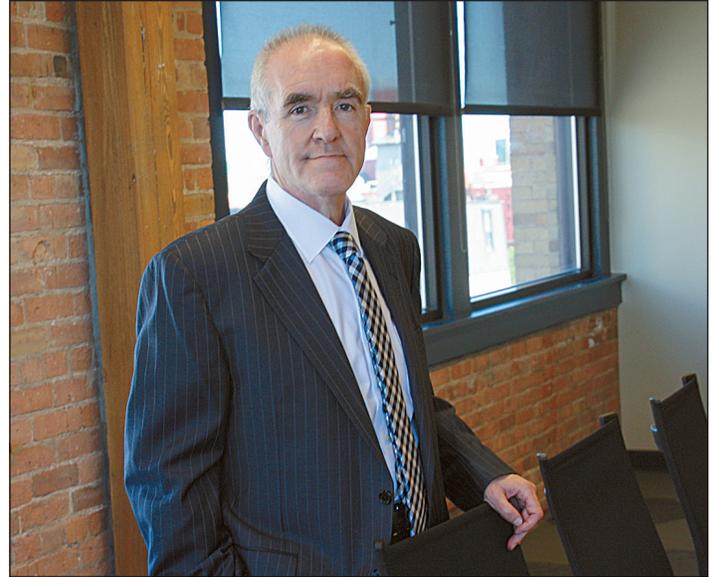


Photo by Kimberly Simpson

Sergio Esteban: "I am a firm believer in building the company that Sal started. We are not done by any means. The sky is the limit."

LaBella Associates has thrived under Salvatore LaBella, Sergio Esteban

By **TRAVIS ANDERSON**

Salvatore LaBella and Sergio Esteban were born and raised thousands of miles apart, but their teamwork created a business that will long outlast them—and that's just the way the longtime partners at LaBella Associates P.C. want it.

LaBella grew up on the east side of Rochester, studying pre-engineering at St. John Fisher College. After receiving a master's degree in civil engineering from the University of Minnesota in 1965, he was named partner at Lozier Architects/Engineers Inc. in 1968.

Ten years later, he struck out on his own to form LaBella Associates. During its first two years, the business grew from a single employee to seven, and by 1991 it was named one of the 100 fastest-growing pri-

vate companies by the Rochester Chamber of Commerce.

While LaBella was developing an impressive work ethic, working late into the night at his uncle's grocery store on Clifford Avenue, Esteban was living in Spain. After graduating from Polytechnic School of the University of Madrid—his family was the first in their village to have a member earn a college degree—Esteban met an American woman, Mary Ann, in Spain. They moved to the United States and married in 1976. "We were going to stay for a year or two," he says, with a laugh.

Moving to a different country presented new challenges, which Esteban tackled with enthusiasm. In the private school he attended as a child, the curriculum was taught in French, the language of business at the time. "When I moved here, I had to learn another new language," Esteban says. "I knew very little English, but I have always been a dreamer. I have always enjoyed a challenge."

Esteban joined LaBella Associates in 1981. He earned the job after an impres-

sive hour-long phone call with the company's founder. "I had a good feeling after we talked," LaBella recalls. "I thought, 'This guy might be able to help us.' I always wanted to have the right kind of people on staff, people you could trust all the way through. Sergio was good and he still is."

The business started to thrive. By 2004, Esteban was president and chief operating officer; two years later, he became CEO. LaBella Associates became an industry leader in public-sector civil engineering; it has doubled in size every five years for 15 years. The company opened offices in Buffalo, Corning and Ithaca and in more distant locales such as North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Madrid. The company that once had just a handful of employees now has 460, "but really," Esteban says, "we're still like a family."

LaBella Associates has been named one of the Top 500 Global Design Firms by *Engineering News-Record* and earned Top 100 honors from the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce. The firm

leads the field in several niche markets, including education architecture/engineering. Among notable local projects are the Bausch & Lomb Public Library building, ESL Federal Credit Union's headquarters, and the performing arts center at Nazareth College. The firm has used its increased stature to support a number of local charitable projects, including Flower City Habitat for Humanity and the renovation of the Maplewood YMCA.

Esteban, whose volunteer work includes visits with students at School 9 in Rochester, is known in the design community for ingenuity, a trustworthy nature and gentlemanly spirit. Those who know him understand he brings a special energy and

enthusiasm to each conversation in an effort to make a positive difference.

"On our business card, there is a tagline, and it is a sincere one: Relationships, resources, results," Esteban says. "Many people are focused on the results from the beginning. Our company doesn't work that way. We focus first on building the relationships. If you trust someone, and tomorrow you need something, who will you call? You will call the people that you trust. In the same way, we encourage leadership at all levels. Some people think leadership comes only from the top, but we believe all employees need to be leaders."

Now 68, Esteban has no desire to slow down. With his partner, LaBella, now en-

joying a well-deserved retirement, Esteban continues to work closely with Bob Healy, company president, and Rob Pepe, its chief financial officer. "The three of us form a core," he says. "We make the decisions together and we have fun together."

Esteban still loves what he does, and his vision for the future continues to expand. "This has always been a beautiful environment for me to grow in professionally," he says. "I've had offers to move to other areas and earn more money, but I am a firm believer in building the company that Sal started. We are not done by any means. The sky is the limit."

Travis Anderson is a Rochester-area freelance writer.