

New location, same business creed for Zeco Electric in American Canyon

NATALIE HOFFMAN | Apr 26,2011



Photo by Jorgen Gulliksen, Napa Valley Register

It's not easy keeping up with the challenges of running a business, but Jess Zuniga of Zeco Electric in American Canyon is beating the odds and celebrating his company's 20th birthday.

Today, the electrical contracting business employs almost two dozen electricians and a handful of office employees, but things didn't start out that way. The company came from humble beginnings.

Zuniga, its president, jump-started the venture in May 1991 with his brother and fellow electrician, Mike Zuniga. Immediately before venturing out on their own, the pair worked for Hal Pierce Electric Company in Vallejo.

The brothers had to start somewhere, so Zuniga set up an office at his Napa home.

“When you’re first starting, you don’t even have a phone number,” Zuniga said. “People don’t know where you are. But you make contacts via people you’ve worked for in the past” and pick up business as you go, he said.

Zuniga, whose brother eventually left the business, now runs his electrical empire with the help of employees and his wife, Patricia. The core group of workers is getting accustomed to new digs at 120 Klamath Court in American Canyon — the former home of Custom Garage Doors Inc.

Opened in early April, the new location replaces Zeco’s longtime spot on Hess Drive as the company’s headquarters.

“Moving was quite an experience,” Zuniga said. “You wouldn’t believe how much you gather in 20 years.”

Because the company’s official anniversary is in May, Zuniga said he’s kicking around the idea of having an upcoming open house at the new company location. It’s unclear whether it will be open to the public.

NOTE: Since this article was written, ZECO Electric Company has moved to 3433 Broadway Street, Suite B-1, American Canyon, CA 94503-1229, but maintains the same telephone number of (707) 644-8665.

Zuniga put down his business roots in American Canyon long ago. Touting the ever-expanding town as an affordable place to do business, Zuniga said he was

one of the original board members of the American Canyon Chamber of Commerce during the mid-1990s. Back then, he said, traffic was scant and there was easier access to Interstate 80 and Highway 101 — thoroughfares leading to an array of potential job sites.

Fast-forward to 2011. Zuniga said that among his biggest professional challenges is keeping up with changing technologies and grappling with the effects of the sagging economy. Because Zeco specializes in commercial industrial projects — outfitting large-scale buildings like schools and hospitals — a slowdown in the construction industry is making times tough.

“Things have slowed down quite a bit for all of us,” he said. “The main challenge in this economy is there just is not enough work. ... Money is always an issue, especially when you’re burning money” during slow times, he said.

None of the company’s current job sites are in Napa County, a fact which Zuniga blames on sluggish local building trends. These days, Zuniga’s crews are tackling jobs at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Shasta Regional Medical Center in Redding, and Palo Alto VA hospital facilities.

“We’re here when we can be,” Zuniga said.

When it comes to keeping up with technological advances in his industry, Zuniga said, it’s an ever-changing world. “Green energy is the driving force right now,” he said. “So you’ve got to stay up on this stuff, or you get left behind.”

Zuniga, a businessman with a friendly demeanor and a firm handshake, is president of the Northern California chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association. The Napa County native grew up in Yountville and attended Yountville Elementary School, where his workers took on the campus’s most recent remodel. Zuniga graduated from Napa High School in 1971.

Zeco's local work history is extensive, including many completed projects for Napa Valley Unified School District, local wineries, Dey Labs Inc., and at Kaiser hospital facilities throughout the Bay Area. Zuniga said one of the keys to his company's endurance is developing good relationships with customers and making sure projects are completed on time.

"We like to hold onto our customers and maintain (relationships) so as they grow, they call us back," he said. "We've done a pretty good job of that."