

It's complicated

Abergeldie Complex Infrastructure founder and managing director Mick Boyle spoke with **Sam Jordan Jones** about starting his civil construction company from scratch, what lies ahead and the selfless charity work it allows him to take part in.



Can you give me a brief rundown of your career to date?

I graduated from the University of Sydney in 1985 with a civil engineering degree and commenced working with White Industries [and] completed a couple of projects with them in Canberra. I then moved to Costain where I worked in Darling Harbour and a couple of marine works projects in 1988. I continued working with Costain in Scotland for a couple of years, working on the construction of a large floating submarine base. I moved back to Sydney in 1991, again with Costain. I worked on the construction of four bridges on what is now the F4 freeway out of Western Sydney.

After that I joined Thiess and just followed the work around with them, including a bridge project at Gunnedah in New South Wales, upgrades at the Shell and Caltex refineries in Sydney, a road project at Picton and a major section of Barton Highway near Yass, NSW. I also spent some time with Candac Thiess building the Cullen Bay lock in Darwin.

At the time I just wanted to work on interesting projects and get a broad range of experience. It was a good mix of experience over 10 years.

What was it like establishing Abergeldie and how has the company grown over the years?

When I first started it was just me and now it is 200 people. In the years before I established the company it seemed to me that all the major contractors were just becoming bigger and bigger and looking for very large projects – \$50 million-plus projects. I felt there was a need for a good contractor able to complete those medium-sized projects and I thought there wasn't a whole lot around.

It was very hard going, especially early on, to get from zero to what we are now. It's been a process of winning work, collecting good people, doing good work and then moving forward. It's basically been that process for 18 years.

Initially I started Abergeldie in Canberra in 1994. It went pretty quiet in the ACT, as it did everywhere, in the mid 1990s but opportunities started turning up more in Sydney so I relocated there. We grew out of Sydney for a few years and then in 2007 we reopened an

office in Canberra. Now, we also have offices in Townsville, Brisbane and Newcastle as well.

Where do you see the company heading in the future?

I think we have a team who are used to growing and excited to expand our capabilities so we will continue to expand and grow. I see us probably tripling in size over the next two to three years as I think there is a real need for an organisation like us.

We are focused on \$2 million to \$70 million projects, so they are significant for the infrastructure owner but they are getting on the small side for the major contractors. We are focused on more complex projects, we are not in straight road building or pipeline projects. We are looking at rail, complex bridges, water treatment work, dams, marine work, process plants, tunnels and shafts and electrical infrastructure – so more complicated projects.

It has been a bit quieter more recently, especially in New South Wales, and over the past few years we have spent time ensuring the company has the capabilities to grow. We have done a lot of back office work. Now we have those building blocks in place we are recruiting a few more people and we are actively looking to grow. Not only in the geographical regions we're already present in but other areas as well.

What have been some of the highlights in your career?

It's always a highlight when we have grown into a new area or completed a significant project. Looking back when we started working on dams we did a small project with Hunter Water at Chichester Dam that went very well and then we had the opportunity to work on the Grahamstown Dam near Newcastle and that was a real highlight because it was significantly bigger (\$13 million) than anything else we had done up to that time.

Another highlight was completing some ventilation shafts for BHP in 2000. We used blind boring which was a pretty new technology we brought into Australia – we designed and built the rigs ourselves in-house. We were able to provide huge ventilation shafts, up to 7m in

diameter and 750m deep completed from the surface very safely without anyone having to go into the shaft during the construction phase.

What have been some of the challenges you have faced in your career?

It has been a challenge to make sure that we keep the same work culture that we have had since the beginning of the company. As we have grown and have acquired other businesses and brought in additional people, it's always a challenge to make sure new employees have that culture of safety, doing a good quality job and working to make sure it's finished in a timely manner – the things your reputation is built on. It's just getting that message across and ensuring the team operates in that fashion as you grow.

What are your interests outside of work?

I have been involved with the Vinnies CEO sleepout since its second year in 2007. I happened to go to school with the Bernie Fehon, the founder of the initiative. Since I heard about it I thought it was a very good idea on many levels. You don't really experience what it is like to be homeless but you do get an idea of what it's like to sleep rough, you get together with other CEOs and talk about how you can try and work on a problem that shouldn't exist in a country as rich as Australia and you try and raise some money at the same time.

From that, to try and do something more for the homeless. Abergeldie has been sponsoring a van that goes out to Western Sydney that helps the homeless. It provides some food but mainly it provides conversation time with homeless people who are often lonely. We have at least 20 or 30 people from Abergeldie who volunteer to work on that van, so not only do we sponsor the van but people give up their time and that is something we are very proud of.

I also play soccer to stay fit and have a bit of a run around to try and blow off a bit of steam. I try and spend as much time as I can with my wife, who has been a very involved partner in building Abergeldie, and our four kids – they are aged from 9 through to 17 and a lot of fun to spend time with.