

CULTURE CLUB: SMALL CONSTRUCTION FIRM EMPLOYS IMMIGRANT WORKERS

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Section: BUSINESS; Pg. C9; PROFILE/HOWARD STREETER, FLORENCE STREETER/STREETER'S **CONSTRUCTION** INC.

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Byline: Kathie Sutin/ Special To The Post-Dispatch

Body

* Howard and Florence Streeter have employees from several nationalities, and enjoy helping people get on their feet in a new country.

When Howard and Florence Streeter established Streeter's **Construction** Inc., in 1986, they set out to rehab old houses. They didn't know that ultimately they would be rehabbing lives as well.

For the last few years, the **small**, family-owned company has hired newly arrived **immigrants**. The full-time staff looks like a miniature international institute, with two Filipinos, two Mexicans and a Bosnian, along with the Streeters and another American.

Besides providing jobs, the Streeters sometimes help **workers** find housing, learn English and navigate a new **culture**.

Originally, the couple envisioned "this tiny little company with (Howard Streeter) and maybe one other person," Florence Streeter said. "Then I had the bright idea that we should go to a work fair sponsored by the International Institute and the Home Builders Association."

There, the couple were struck by the plight of people seeking a new life in America. They hired two Bosnians. "Those two people aren't with us any more, but we helped them get a start," she said.

The Streeters started out in the **construction** business by buying houses, living in them as they did the rehab work, then selling them. From there, they moved on to remodeling houses for other people.

Some of the houses were in the Bevo area, where a lot of Bosnians have settled. After the Streeters hired the first two Bosnians, other **immigrants** came looking for work.

"Pretty soon we had another person who was an electrician. He started working with us (maybe) the second day he was in America. He is an excellent electrician, and he was able to get in with the union and he's got a really good job now."

The electrician brought his brother-in-law, Asim Hasanovic, who Florence Streeter called "an incredible craftsman." He's been with the company three years and now speaks fluent English, she said.

The recent addition of two Mexican **workers** was the result of Florence Streeter's visit to a restaurant. "I just happened to be talking ... about a house for rent, and one of the waiters asked if we had any extra work," she said. "He had two brothers who needed jobs. I said, 'I have something they could help us with.'"

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Language with an international crew is sometimes an issue, but it's not insurmountable, the Streeters said.

"Sometimes we draw pictures, and sometimes Howard has to stay a little longer than he might if English happened to be the first language, but it's a small price," Florence Streeter said.

Howard Streeter said he's learned a little Bosnian along the way, too.

The language barrier also meant the Streeters weren't always initially sure what kind of skills employees might bring to the job. And Howard Streeter said the prospect of hiring people whose backgrounds he couldn't check was "kind of scary."

Still, he said, "It just felt right to do it. Whatever problems we had, we just worked through."

Florence Streeter said they also worried about how customers would react to workers who didn't speak English. "But overall, the public has been so supportive and very open, and if it takes them a little longer to understand, they haven't seemed to be upset about it."

Doug and Laurie Sparr have used Streeter's for several projects on their south St. Louis County home. He said he was impressed by the crew's attention to detail. "They were here very late in the evening several times because they would run into an issue, and they wouldn't leave it undone. ... It's stuff like that that you don't find with certain other contractors."

Howard Streeter got into the house remodeling business through a circuitous route. He studied electrical engineering in college with the goal of designing electric cars. But he didn't get a degree.

"I somehow worked my way back around to just being an auto mechanic," he said. "I had always been interested in carpentry. Florence and I rehabbed houses when we first got married."

One of his auto repair customers wanted to build a 1,200-square-foot room addition.

"He really loved the way I took care of his cars, and he pretty much insisted I build the addition, just knowing the way I work," Streeter said. "I basically spent every night reading magazines and watching 'This Old House' to figure out what to do the next day."

That project started Streeter on the way to forming his construction firm.

Today, the company that wanted to stay small continues to expand the scope of its work. It is venturing into Jefferson and Franklin counties and soon will build its first modular house in Pacific.

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Streeter's Construction Inc.

Owners: Howard and Florence Streeter

Top executive: Howard Streeter, president

Employees: 8 full-time, 2 part-time

Address: 7 Vance Road, Valley Park

What they do: General contractor and home remodeling company

Notes

SMALL BUSINESS

Graphic

PHOTO; (1-4) Color Photos by DIANE WILSON - FROM THIS TO THIS/ (1,2) Streeter's **Construction** rehabs condemned modular homes, such as this one (left) in the Golden Ridge subdivision in Grubbsville, and makes them livable again (right)./ (3,4) This kitchen in a modular home in Grubbsville (left) was left in extremely poor condition by the property's previous owner. The picture on the right represents what it will look like after being fixed and cleaned by Streeter's **Construction**.

Classification

Language: English

Subject: CRAFT & TRADE **WORKERS** (88%); HOUSING ASSISTANCE (73%); IMMIGRATION (71%); FULL TIME EMPLOYMENT (68%); COMPANY STRUCTURES & OWNERSHIP (66%); FAMILY COMPANIES (66%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (50%)

Company: **CONSTRUCTION** INC (59%); **CONSTRUCTION** INC (59%)

Industry: **CONSTRUCTION** (88%); RESIDENTIAL **CONSTRUCTION** (72%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (93%)

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