

# Florence Concrete Products

## Local Company Flourishes By Thinking Outside The Box

by Laura Edwards

**W**hen Sherry Jones began working for Florence Concrete Products 23 years ago, she was fresh out of high school looking for any kind of work she could find. She started out with the Florence Concrete as a part-time secretary.

Today, Jones is in her eighth year as president of the company, which, under her direction, has blossomed.

For the past three years, Florence Concrete Products has completed the precast wall panels, columns and beams for three federal prisons.

Last year, Florence Concrete Products added two new divisions to its operations, a tilt-up division and a retail division.

In addition to her unflagging drive and ambition, Jones has figured out how to balance family and work, and she knows when to push and when to relax or joke with her employees.

"The whole key to my success has been the people with whom I work," she says. "They are wonderful. They want to see this company succeed. That's why I stay here."

Much of Jones' gratitude goes to the company's founders, Fred Cross and Hugh Leatherman, who supported her in her rise to the top. They not only paid for part of her schooling, but they believed in her, she says, which made all the difference.

As a team, Jones and the company's 200 employees are continuing the tradition of excellence established by the owners as they take Florence Concrete Products solidly into the future.

### Humble Beginnings

Fred Cross was working in Charlotte, NC, following a stint in the Vietnam War, when he met Hugh

Leatherman. They found they had a common dream – going into the concrete business. Not long after, a block plant became available in Florence. Together, they founded Florence Concrete Products in 1955, with six employees.

The company was first located on Maple Street, not far from its present location. A few years later eight acres became available on North Cashua Street, so the company moved locales and has been there ever since.

Over the years, Cross and Leatherman added on to the site and, as business rolled in, kept expanding. By the early 1970s, the owners had purchased a plant in Sumter to manufacture prestress concrete, eventually making their Florence location corporate headquarters.

In 1981, Sherry Jones was an 18-year-old graduate of St. John's High School. The daughter of Henry and Jerry Miller of Darlington, Jones had learned a good work ethic from her father, who was a carpenter.

Determined to attend college, Jones knew she would have to go to school at night and work full-time during the day to pay for her schooling. She had a full-time position with a public accountant, but when her hours were cut, she started looking for another part-time job.

That's when she began working as a secretary for Florence Concrete Products. She attended Florence-Darlington Technical College in the evenings and earned her associate's degree in computer science in three years. From FDTC Jones headed straight for Francis Marion University, where she continued her schooling until she finally received a master's degree in business administration in 1995.

"If I'd taken a break in my routine I wouldn't have finished," she says. "School became a way of life for me. And I enjoyed it."

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She was also assisted by Cross and Leatherman, who paid for her undergraduate schooling.

"They helped me so much, and I'm so grateful," she says. "They've always believed in me."

Spurred on by the owners' encouragement, Jones moved up the corporate ladder from secretary to accountant to personnel to director to vice president of special projects. At that point, she went to Sumter to set up things like labor cost reports, sales projections and cost reports and scheduling.

"This is a very specialized industry," she says. "It's something you have to learn."

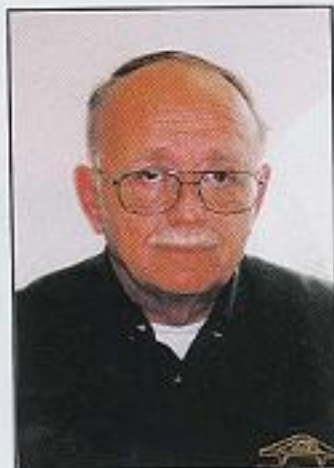
Jones gradually began taking on the responsibilities of the company president, and in 1996, Cross officially made her president.

Although it was a job she was essentially familiar with, Jones says the title was a bit scary. But it was a position both she and Cross felt she could handle. Although Leatherman no longer participates in the day-to-day operations of the company, he is still a stockholder.

"I enjoy working with Sherry," Cross says. "We don't agree



**Project manager for the tilt-up division, Vince Freeman has more than ten years experience in the industry. He and his wife have a one-year-old daughter.**



**Larry Covey is a salesman for the precast division. Florence Concrete Products is his fourth precast plant in 30 years. He also spent ten years as a salesman in the construction industry.**



**Now in his eighties, Fred Cross is still active in the company he founded in 1955. He is in his office five days a week and is an active member of several boards in the community.**

**His son Howard, who grew up in the business, is now a vice president with the company.**

on everything, but if we did, we wouldn't need both of us. I made her president, and it's working out quite well."

## **Expanding The Concrete Business**

One of Cross' pet peeves is people who confuse cement with concrete. "Cement, sand and stone make up concrete," he explains. "Cement by itself is not concrete."

When Florence Concrete Products was first founded, it started out as a precast and prestressed concrete manufacturer, which is the concrete used for columns and wall panels for buildings and girders, pilings and barrier rails for bridges. It also had a plant producing concrete blocks.

After moving its production of precast concrete to Sumter, the company shut down its block plant in Florence. Its block plant

in Marion was recently sold because several similar companies were moving into the area.

In the past year, Florence Concrete added two new divisions to its precast division.

A retail division, based out of its Florence office, sells any kind of concrete a homeowner fixing up his or her place would need. Brick for the house or a retaining wall; pavers for a driveway, patio or pool area; or cultured stone for a fireplace are among the various products available to the public.

While Florence Concrete doesn't manufacture these products, it's doing an increasingly good job of selling them. Jones landscaped and bricked the front of the office to promote the retail business. She's also learning the fine art of advertising, something



**Office staff includes Wendy Godoy (in charge of payroll and company secretary); executive vice president Howard Cross, Linda Strickland (outside sales-brick and block division); Kathy Gilreath (dispatcher, inside sales-brick and block division); Sherry Jones, Fred Cross, and accountant Gail Sutton.**

the company, which has not dealt with the general public before, is new to.

The other new division is its tilt-up division, which produces wall panels that are produced at a customer's site.

The new facility for Fleet Funding in Florence was the first project on which Florence Concrete used tilt-up construction. Instead of hauling a wall to the site from the Sumter plant, each wall was poured on-site.

Theoretically, this technology is supposed to be cheaper and possibly faster. But the primary reason Florence Concrete added tilt-up construction to its prestressed concrete manufacturing is because of competition. And because tilt-up construction is so self-contained, the company can go beyond its current market, which is focused mainly in South and North Carolina.

"I saw a need for this division, so we got it started to keep others from taking our customers," Jones says. "We also have all the equipment and 50 years of experience behind us. With tilt-up, we're not limited. We could expand throughout the Southeast. I'm not crazy about going up north, but I will."

Although the market for tilt-up projects has been slow, the company is beginning to see increased interest in this type of construction.

Vince Freeman, project manager and estimator for the tilt-up division, joined the company last September to get the division up



**Located on Celebration Boulevard in Florence, The Assurant Group project was finished in July 2003.**

and running. He admits it's been challenging, but working at the company has been rewarding.

"If you do your job, it's going to show. If you don't do your job, it's going to show," he says. "Basically, Sherry leaves it all up to me. I answer to her, and she expects a lot, but that's good."

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In addition to starting two new divisions, Jones has steered the company into multi-million dollar projects with its core division, prestressed concrete.

Virginia-based Hensel Phelps Construction has worked with Florence Concrete on three federal prison projects – Bennettsville and Salters, SC and Butner, NC.

“The folks at Florence Concrete dig in and work out all details,” says Rick Tucker, operations manager at Hensel Phelps. “They do quality work. We end up with a satisfied owner at the end of the day, which helps the entire team.”

Florence Concrete also worked on the Florence-Darlington Technical College parking deck, the Florence Civic Center and several bridges, just to name a few of its many accomplishments.

Sanford Contractors has teamed up with Florence Concrete on more than 100 bridge projects in North Carolina. “Sherry delivers on time and delivers a quality product,” says Randall Gattis, vice president of Sanford Contractors. “She stands by her word. That company is ‘thumbs up’ in my book.”

It’s the company’s ability to work on such a diverse number of projects that gives it an edge, says Larry Covey, a salesman for the precast division.

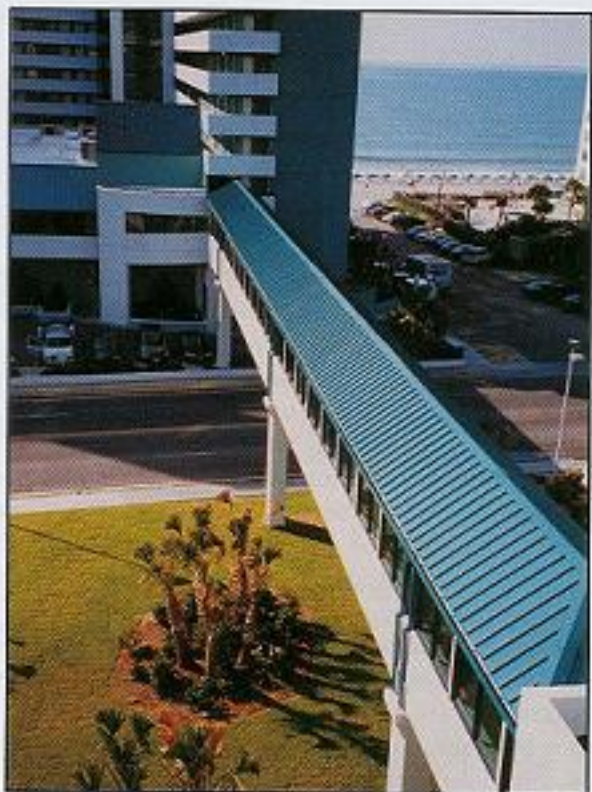
“Other companies specialize, but we can basically make anything in the precast industry, from parking garages to bridge beams to baseball stadiums,” he says. “We can always find something to sell that we can make, and that’s only because of the great leader we have.”

## A Good Company

While Florence Concrete Products may be small, the fact that everyone works together makes it great, Jones says. And the hard work of its employees gives the company its momentum, she adds.

Florence Concrete employs three professional engineers, six drafters and two outside salesmen. Altogether, about 200 employees work at Florence Concrete, most of whom are there to stay, Jones says.

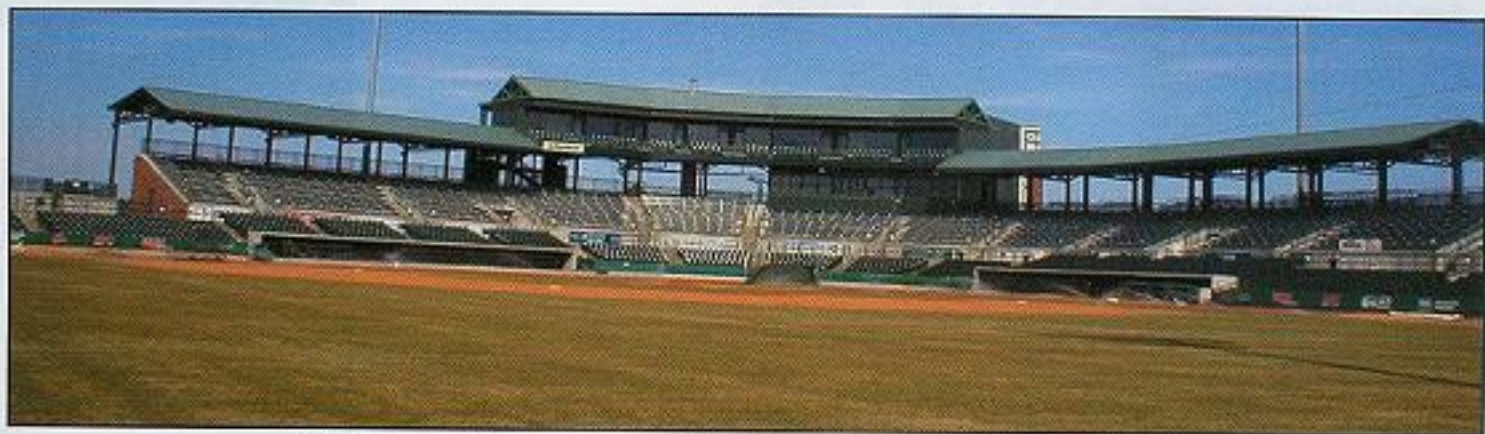
Yard manager Edger Nero is one of those employees. He has been loading and unloading trucks and taking care of the grounds for 36 years. As far as he’s concerned, there’s not another company he’d rather work for.



Florence Concrete did the concrete work on the pedestrian walkway at the Landmark Hotel in Myrtle Beach. All concrete is poured at the company’s Sumter plant and shipped to worksites. According to Sherry Jones, one concrete column can weigh up to 90,000 pounds.

“I like working with the people here. I have a great job,” says Nero.

Howard Cross grew up in his father’s business. He says the construction industry is influenced by the economy and can be somewhat like a roller coaster ride. But, says Howard, he enjoys the constantly changing nature of the business. One of the job’s biggest perks, he says, are the people he gets to work with at Florence Concrete.



The Riverdogs of Charleston call the Joseph Riley Baseball Stadium home. Florence Concrete was responsible for all concrete work.

"We have a good group of people who go above and beyond the call of duty, from management on down," says Howard. "Sherry's done a wonderful job bringing a sense of unity to our employees. There's a team spirit here and we go out of our way to satisfy customers."

One unique aspect of Florence Concrete is its refusal to bog itself down with layers of management, Covey says, making management acutely aware of everything that's going on in the company.

"There are not a lot of levels between our top management and the men in the field," Covey says. "As a salesman, I'm dealing with the same customers Sherry deals with. That might be considered unusual in a larger company."

But Jones isn't one to do things the way someone else might do them. She barely bats an eye at the glaring fact that she's a woman at the top of a man's field. As far as she's concerned, she's just a person working really hard at doing her job. Jones, who holds a general contractor's license, is simply the best at what she does.

"People trust me. I've built good relationships with our customers. And I like being in this industry. I wear boots, a hard hat and safety glasses, and that's fun for me."

Earning her degrees, working through the ranks, and succeeding as president of the company has meant a tremendous amount of work for Jones. She admits it would have been difficult to do with a family, so she put it off until recently.

She married J.J. Jones, a conductor with CSX, in 1997. Two years later, the couple had a child - Jake. It's taken an understanding husband who is willing to take care of Jake when she's traveling and a close network of family and friends who continue to provide the kind of support Jones needs to be both a good mother and a successful business woman.

Anyone in the precast industry will attest to Jones' reputation as an honest, hardworking and capable person.

Florence Concrete Products is a member of the Precast/Prestressed Concrete Institute, a national association of precasters. Its suborganization, the Georgia-Carolina Prestressed Association,