

MISSION ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE

With less than five months to build a challenging hilltop home, this contractor brought the job in three weeks early

Imagine it's 6 a.m. and the day's first sunlight is filtering through dark, blustery clouds. From your job site high on a hill, you gaze down on the tile roofs and palm-tree-lined streets of Santa Barbara, Calif., and

by **Kathy Price-Robinson**

from there to the gray, wintry sea.

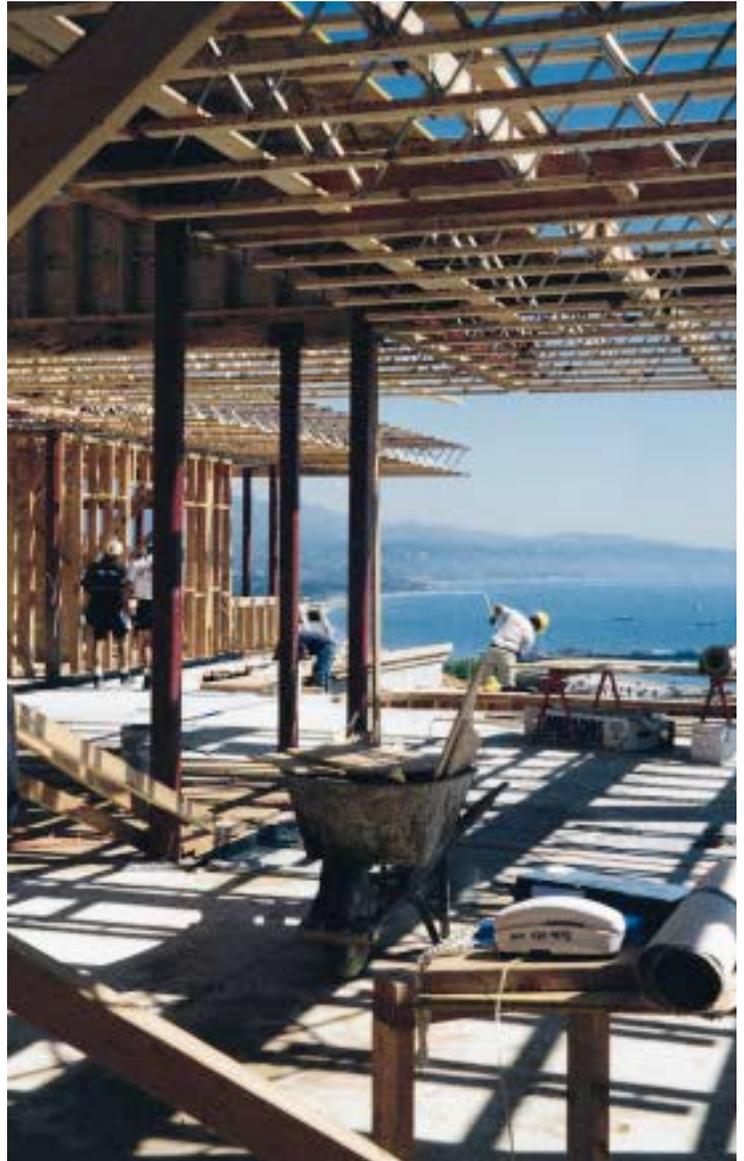
As your crew of 18 gathers, you recall the three weeks gone by, when 15 workers formed steel and set forms for 28-foot stem walls — 12 feet in the ground and 16 feet above. Today, 10 concrete trucks are scheduled to start rumbling up the hill by 8 a.m.

Around 7 o'clock, the boom truck pulls up. Because there is so little flat space to park on the sloped site, you have told the driver exactly where to park his rig. However, he parks his heavy truck 3 feet over, closer to the ledge, and to your horror the rain-soaked ground beneath the tires begins to give way. Within seconds, the boom truck bogs down on the muddy slope, tilted at an alarming angle. "Oh my god," you think. "It's going to roll."

Thankfully, the truck does not roll, but you've got cement trucks on the way and 18 workers standing by. And more than that, a big storm is forecast for that night. If the concrete isn't poured, the formwork will be pushed out of place by the heavy, rain-soaked earth and the job could be delayed for a week or more.

Racing to Beat the IRS

But wait, there's more. A delay of weeks will prove disastrous for the homeowner, who must get an occupancy permit by May 1, just four months away. If he doesn't, he'll owe the IRS hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital gains taxes on a house he sold nearly two years ago. In fact, if he doesn't get the occupancy permit on time, and



Company Profile

Allen Associates, Santa Barbara, Calif.

Owner: Dennis Allen, 55

Company founded: 1983

No. of employees: 39

Annual volume: \$4 to \$5 million

Company specializes in: Custom residential work, new and remodeling; seismic retrofits; tenant improvement

Awards: Builder of the Year, Santa Barbara Contractors Association, Santa Barbara Beautiful Awards

Member of: Santa Barbara Contractors Association, The Sustainability Project, National Association of Home Builders, Custom Builders Council

Miscellaneous

Does your company have a newsletter? No.

Does your company employ an estimator? No. Our project foremen estimate their individual jobs.

How do you compensate employees? Do you give regular raises? Hourly wages plus bonuses for a job well done. Raises are based on merit.

How much do you pay day laborers? Laborers start at \$7/hour.

What kind of training do you provide your employees?

We hold tool training sessions for new employees, and job-site training for workers who show promise. We regularly send our senior personnel to seminars and workshops.

Do you have an employee manual? Who wrote it? Yes. Many in the company were involved in writing it. There is a lot about safety in it. New employees are required to read it.

Do you have regular company meetings? How often? Company meetings for our 14 foremen are held about every three weeks.

How do you communicate with your lead workers and employees? Job-site phones, 13 beepers, 6 cell phones. We also use foremen's meetings.

What's your policy on radios on the job? One radio at moderate volume if all workers agree on station. No battle of the bands. No radio during job-site meetings.

What's your policy on employees using the client's phone on the job? We make certain that we have a phone exclusively for our use on the job, usually our own, but sometimes one supplied by the client.

What is your hope for the future of the company? To continue promoting Hispanics to leadership positions within our company. To become the No. 1 "green" builder in our area, and the top quality builder.

loses that money, he won't be able to afford this dream house and will be forced to sell it.

As you think about the grinning, cherub-faced homeowner, who uses a wheelchair to get around and often exclaims that "you can see God from up here," you know the concrete absolutely, positively must be poured today.

Welcome to another day in a grand adventure for Dennis Allen and John Scoggins, president and field representative, respectively, of Allen Associates, a general contracting firm. The company was hired in December 1995 to build a large custom home overlooking the Pacific Ocean by May 1, 1996.

"We started without a contract," says Allen. "We started with a handshake because the plans weren't ready. The client's overriding concern, which became my overriding concern, was to meet the deadline."

While the homeowner had two years after selling his previous house to invest in the next, in order to avoid the large tax bite, there had been delays in the process. He threw the first design out and finally hired designer Jane Lily to draw the final plans. He was also careful about the contractor he chose, interviewing no fewer than eight. Allen was hired, he believes, partly because of the intricate schedule he prepared — it was four pages deep and took two weeks to complete with the help of a computer expert. But it showed exactly how the job could be pulled off in the small window of time remaining until the tax deadline.

Meanwhile, Back at the Site

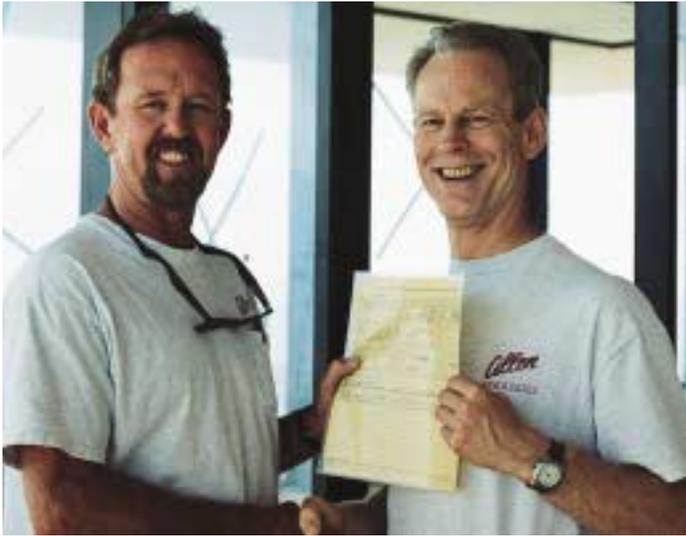
Back at "boom day," Scoggins was distraught, and even considered calling off the concrete trucks. Soon, however, he hit on a solution: Chain the boom truck to a backhoe and pull it off the slope and out of the mud. When that didn't work, another solution came up: Get a crane to lift the boom truck back onto the parking pad. And because they needed a crane the next day anyway, the costs would be reasonable.

On the phone, Allen and Scoggins called scores of crane operators up and down the central coast of California. Finally, Specialty Crane of Santa Barbara called back and said they could be there by 11:15 a.m. At 11:30, a chain was being wrapped around the truck while heavy concrete trucks idled in line on the steep road leading to the site.

By 12:30 p.m., the truck had been lifted up like a toy and set 3 feet over and the concrete started flowing around 1 p.m. It flowed through the afternoon and into the night. The owner, who often found the building site impossible to negotiate in his wheelchair, was stationed in his downtown apartment, watching the drama play out through binoculars. In the evening, he had a bevy of large pizzas delivered to the site. Around the same time, heavy drops started falling from the sky and kept up a menacing presence until the last truck was emptied at 9:30 p.m. — completing a total pour of 140 yards.

"It was absolutely amazing dedication," Allen says of the crew, who worked 16 hours on that fateful day.

Just before leaving the site at 10 p.m., Scoggins and the crew



John Scoggins, left, and Dennis Allen proudly display the occupancy permit, which was issued three weeks before the big deadline.

covered the driveway with plastic, and as predicted, the rains fell through the night, dropping 2 inches before letting up.

Other Challenges

As dramatic as boom day was, it was just another in a long line of challenges and victories during the course of the job. Here are some of the other issues that arose:

Details, details. Because the house was designed hastily, and by a designer who spends a large part of her time teaching at an East Coast university, many details were not on the plans, and had to be decided by the builder or the owner, usually at the last minute. "They were working so fast, I couldn't keep up with the decisions," the homeowner says.

Workers everywhere. The job required three full-time supervisors, and often had as many as 45 workers on site at a time. Because the site only had a small flat area, Scoggins fought to keep that clear for materials. He could often be heard telling a worker who had parked on the pad, "You! Move your truck! Now!"

For months at a time, 10 or more trades worked side by side on the job every day, including framers, electricians, plumbers, drywallers, insulators, masons, roofers, concrete workers, sheet metal workers, and utility installers. During the entire job, there was just one argument, between a framer and a lather, over use of a ladder. "Basically people really flowed well," Allen said. "We had to help them think about where they could work."

Unhappy neighbors. An attorney neighbor threatened legal action if the crews didn't stop working so early. "I'd really like to stop the job," Scoggins told him, "but we have pending rain and we can't stop." Finally, an agreement was struck, with the support of the city, that workers could build the house from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. That didn't satisfy the neighbor, but it limited legal action.

Late delivery. The trusses, which were promised in six weeks

from Trus Joist MacMillan, ended up taking 12 weeks. "I was fit to be tied," Allen says, recalling how he and the owner complained all the way to the top of the typically reliable company. "I imagine some heads rolled. We actually had to shut the job down for a few days, which was awful."

Complex custom features. Elements of the house were designed for the special needs and comfort of the homeowner. The thresholds had to be smooth, but still divert water away from the house. A unique pulley and rail system was created to lift the client out of his wheelchair and into a hot tub in the master bedroom, and from there to the bed. And a radiant slab floor was installed over a raised foundation. The etched concrete of the concrete floor had to be protected with drywall during construction of the walls and roof.

Slab granite counters in the kitchen, cantilevered and lowered to accommodate a wheelchair-seated cook, had to be reinforced to withstand the weight of guests in the kitchen who would invariably use the counters for sitting space.

Special client, special job access. To allow the owner maximum involvement with the building process, the crew often built plywood ramps around the construction site. "The owner was just enthralled," Scoggins says. "He even brought a few of his wheelchair buddies up here."

All's Well That Ends Well

During construction, the client had T-shirts made for the crew that said, "Mission Impossible," which showed Scoggins on top of the house with a whip, yelling "May 1st!" The city building inspector was portrayed as a sleuth with a magnifying glass, and Allen was depicted as a top-hatted magician. In response, Allen gave the owner a company T-shirt, declaring, "You're now an Allen Associate."

The perseverance of the company was so effective that the occupancy permit was issued three weeks before the deadline. Another month of construction followed that, and the elated client threw a thank you party for the crew.

Since the job was completed, the owner and builders have become very good friends. In fact, Scoggins can frequently be found at the house on Mondays for the weekly football party.

And, of course, the owner is deeply grateful: "You know how many nightmares I had on this job? None. Integrity is what it's all about."



Kathy Price-Robinson writes on construction topics from Arroyo Grande, Calif.

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