

FEATURED PRO

# Reputation

*A talk with builder Eric Johnson about early-morning swims, catastrophes and Ojai*

By Bret Bradigan

Eric Johnson often leaves his Oak View home at 4:50 a.m. to take advantage of one of the area's best features — proximity to the Pacific Ocean. He and a crew of friends meet at Seaward Avenue in Ventura for an early-morning swim. He then heads to north up the Highway 101, or northeast up Highway 33 to Ojai.

As Director, Santa Barbara region for Allen Construction, he's got a lot of territory to cover, and an early, invigorating ritual makes it possible, even pleasant. Johnson needs to leave some reserve energy for his family. He and his wife recently celebrated 20 years of marriage and have twin 13-year-old daughters.

It also helps that Allen Construction — an employee-owned company — feels like a family for Johnson. "When it swings up, we share in the reward together," Johnson said. He's been with Allen for 10 years now.

"I was working for high-end residential building in Beverly Hills and living in Ventura at the time. My home was becoming just a bedroom; so I started looking for something closer," Johnson said. As an environmental studies major at University of California at Santa

Barbara, he's long familiar with the area and looked up the coast, rather than down, for his next situation.

That college major came in handy at Allen Construction; an industry leader in green, sustainable construction. "I applied and was hired as a project manager. Then I became a sales manager and my title now is director. I manage Allen projects from Santa Ynez to Malibu to Ojai, you gotta go where the work is," Johnson said.

Construction runs deep in Johnson's family. "My father was a concrete man and general contractor, and he said, 'Eric, you can go to college. It's my treat. You can be anything you want in the world, just don't get into construction like I did,'" he said. "So I became a school teacher and water polo coach — but I didn't find joy and satisfaction in that."

After expressing his frustration, Johnson's father said, "Come work for me for the summer, and then in the Fall you can find something to do ... that's been 27 years that I've been in construction full time. My mom cried at Sunday dinner, 'Eric, it's not too late'" to choose another path, he laughed.

His days are busy. "After my swim, I

head toward the job, dealing with the project guys, the framers, the finish carpenters, or talk to the superintendent or project manager. That's the heart of the production part of our business, between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. You always want to check on the production site earlier in the day. Then maybe lunch dates, be it with a new client, architect or someone from the office," he said. "In the afternoon, I'm focused on the sales process — estimating, finishing proposals, reviewing deliveries, returning calls and emails — basic troubleshooting and problem solving."

There's a lot to manage, with 10 to 14 projects going on at any time, Johnson said, before he can head to his home in Oak View around 5:30 or 6 p.m. on a typical day.

In the changing tides of the construction trades, there are big issues to face. "This labor shortage is a real thing," he said. "It started with the economic downturn (2007-08) and immigration doesn't flow as freely as it used to. Add in the natural disasters in Florida, Texas, when a lot of skilled labor left. They found an affordable lifestyle and didn't come back after rebuilding those communities. And short-term — the fires, the tragic mudslides and rainy season slowed

# is Everything

things down," he said.

The twin tragedies of the Thomas Fire in December 2017 and the Montecito mudslides that claimed 23 one month later have been keeping Allen Construction, and many other local construction firms, busy. "The Thomas Fire did not generate as much work as the mudflow, as fast. Mudflow was cleanup work, trying to get people back into their homes — the fire we were dealing, primarily, with total loss. So many people had to go through the design phase, the permit phase.

It was an emotionally exhausting time as well, he said. "There was a lot of 'deer in the headlights' looks. So many people never planned on a project like this being part of their lives. Most people have done small home projects, but very few at this level." Johnson noted that Allen Construction had built up a lot of institutional wisdom dealing with the periodic destructive wildfires that sweep through the chaparral, "the Tea Fire, Jesusita, Whittier Fire, all that experience was helpful for when dealing with a victim — a shoulder to cry on, to hold their hands," Johnson said.

Allen Construction, founded in 1984 and now with 100 employees, held six

informational workshops to help people navigate the often complicated insurance process, with no obligation to sign on as a client, giving back their expertise to a community in need of it after twin catastrophes. "Then we step away," Johnson said. "You call us if you need us." They've helped 27 homeowners get back on track through their insurance claims, and have built 12 or 13 of those homes, plus another six or seven in the pipeline."

Johnson said a lot of new building contractors have come on the scene lately. "Some will make it, some won't, but we'll be here to help finish the project when it doesn't go well," he said. Given their size and longevity, Johnson says some people assume that their services are expensive. "In fact, size gives us incredible buying power with vendors. It allows us to specialize in what we do to make us more efficient buildings. Half of those 100 employees are in-house labor — helping us throttle or manage this labor shortage. Also, that experience and size ensures quality.

Each community or jurisdiction is different on their regulations about building codes and permits. Johnson said, "the City of Ojai is rather efficient, the properties in the county take a little more time and energy to permit, but



Eric Johnson with his wife Trisha and twins Kenya and Anika.

wherever the project is, inspectors out there are very helpful and very fair. They all have a good sense of building and the building experience, which you don't always find."

The Ojai Valley, in particular, "is happier and friendlier," Johnson said. "People know each other, whether through church or school or community groups, they are socially aware because it's such a small town. Reputation is everything." Johnson isn't all work, though, enjoying doing chores on his small farm with his wife and daughters. "We enjoy Ojai — we hike a lot, go downtown for many of the free events Ojai offers. We also like to camp or have a beach day."