

# Donald Led Duke

## *A Life Built Upon A Firm Foundation*



Don Led Duke built his business on a firm foundation. Starting at age nineteen in the masonry business as an apprentice bricklayer, Don built his company by estimating jobs during the day and working nights and weekends with his crew to get their jobs done. He started his first company, Colonic Masonry Co., as a sub contractor in 1973. Shortly after he established his own general construction company and was a frontrunner of the design-build concept. In 1983 he merged with Robert Barry and Michael Bette to form BBL, which became the largest construction design-build company in the Capital Region. With over \$300 million in projects in 2010, BBL has staked its claim as an industry leader. Completing fifty to seventy-five jobs per year in twenty states with over 350 employees, BBL offers a full range of construction services.

Don Led Duke was a creative genius, a born leader. He made work fun. He was constantly initiating new ideas to better himself, others, and business in general. Led Duke let you choose the best method to make your vision complete. He could fly at the 60,000 foot level to meet head on with the high brows or at 6,000 feet on the jobsite setting the forms for a concrete pour. In the boardroom meetings full of professionals, he could share knowledge with the best of them—his charisma, street smarts, and erudition impressing them all and earning their deep respect.

As a mentor, Led Duke worked with all of his management members and crews to ensure that he shared with them his vision and helped them prosper on a new level. It is a testament to his leadership ability that the company



has had very little turnover in the last thirty-seven years. As evidenced today, BBL has forty employees with twenty years of service or more. Don continuously worked to build relationships with employees, contractors, and members of society—the old-fashioned way—with a handshake. He was a man of his word and anyone who did business with him knew his word was as good as gold. He always built upon his successes and learned from his mistakes. He was a genuine people person who lived life to the fullest, with a true desire to see others succeed.

Led Duke was a perfectionist, but never criticized. He instead looked to the positive, building upon strengths and learning from the errors of the past to grow toward a positive outcome. Don's ability to multi-task was extraordinary. He could manage twenty projects and estimates at once without a hitch. When asked about these skills he said, "I am looking at my watch, not my calendar."

Don was generous, but never an attention seeker. He donated anonymously to over fifty charities per year. He contributed to colleges, universities, hospitals, not-for-profits, military, public safety, and individuals he believed would contribute to a better world. If an employee needed assistance or someone needed funding for an operation, he thought nothing of cutting a check to ensure that the individual was assisted—and again, he did so anonymously.

Don's core values were the following:

1. Customer satisfaction
2. Quality product
3. Safe work place
4. Security and opportunity for employees

Don would say, "If we fail as a company, 350 families will be affected. Failure is not an option."

When asked why he started his own business Don said, "There wasn't a plan, I

just worked. It was like jumping into the Hudson. I just kept flapping my arms until I reached the shore.”

What made you successful Don? He replied, “My enthusiasm; my energy was contagious. I have a passion about my work. I never quit.”

Don had a presence about him. He loved what he did—he loved the art of the deal, to plan and build all at the same time. He was a humble and unassuming man, and a hard worker. He was a hard charging individual who was genuine with no false accolades. He was warm and friendly to his friends and he brought out the best in everyone. Don was a truly unselfish leader who loved his family and worked and played incessantly to take care of them. Don’s motivation came from a constant search for excellence. He was not one to sit and relax—once he sat, a new idea on how to improve an aspect of the business would pop into his head and he would get up and get moving toward that goal. He was an inspired man.

Led Duke organized strong product lines. He developed an approach of a single source solution in the company. He helped create a strong backlog with 70% repeat business. Don’s strict mandate was to ensure that all of his project managers would receive a letter of recommendation from their clients. Don believed that a satisfied client equaled success.

Don developed the design-build/construction management company. As he continued on, he and the management team developed several specialized divisions within BBL. These new expansions were instrumental in the enhanced direction and vision for the future of BBL. Led



Duke’s succession plan has been in play for the last ten years. While other firms died with the demise of their founders, Don Led Duke wanted to ensure the transfer of responsibility and ability to manage what was already in place. He created a system where each group project executive develops their management team that reports to senior management. He was prescient in his forecasting, as he passed on at a much too early age.

One of the difficulties of a strong leader is to be able to delegate and share their vision and management techniques with their successors. Don developed the ability to “let go,” especially over the last ten years. He understood the limitations that empirical management could cause and Don, instead of holding onto the controls, let go and allowed his successors to manage the company, freeing him up to develop and renew important relationships with his clients.

With such a strong foundation, and a well-planned succession plan in place, the future is bright for BBL. BBL also continues to collaborate with Columbia Development and its president, Joe Nicolla.

The management team at BBL that will help build its future includes:

<b>Kevin Gleason</b>	<b>President</b>
<b>Paul Trigger</b>	<b>SVP</b>
<b>Steve Obermayer</b>	<b>SVP CFO</b>
<b>Jon DeForest</b>	<b>VP</b>

BBL’s affiliate companies are as follows: BBL Carlton, BBL Construction Services, BBL Medical Facilities, BBL Campus Development, and BBL Hospitality.

The foundation for success has been laid. Don Led Duke created a culture at BBL that will forever foster strength, growth, and positivity. He will always be remembered and held in the highest esteem. As Steve Obermayer said, “Don was bigger than life.”

*Building* **stronger** *communities*

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