



## History of BL Companies

The idea to form a traffic studies and engineering company in the mid-1980s brewed over time during a two and a half hour commute from North Haven, CT, to New York. Eve Barakos, a mid-20s traffic engineer was living in North Haven, commuting to her job in Manhattan and married to Bob Landino, a civil engineer.

According to Eve, she had two choices, "Either my marriage had to go, or my job had to go." She realized there was a viable, uncharted third option, which was to start her own company and forego the commute.

In January 1986, after working in her apartment for a bit, she used their \$500 savings and put it towards the rental of a work space on the second floor of the Mr. Trophy shop at 57 State Street in North Haven. That attic space, sparsely equipped with furniture from their apartment became the site for what would eventually become BL Companies — a \$35 million integrated architecture, engineering and environmental services company.

Eight months later, Barakos-Landino, Inc., was established.

Says Eve, "My goal was to be a preeminent traffic engineering and transportation planning company. We worked late, we partied at night, and we had a ton of fun, though we worked seven days a week. I loved my job and it was great to work with my spouse. Over time, the company evolved, as we entered different markets. In retrospect, I'm personally most proud of the people I worked with to make BL Companies. We truly enjoyed doing quality work, working on fabulous projects and helping to bring the company up the ranks in the industry."

Bob moonlighted with the company for the first year and joined Eve full-time in 1987. His presence enabled the company to branch into civil engineering work.

That same year, their company expanded to about 10 employees and they purchased a Victorian house at 215 Sherman Avenue, Hamden, Connecticut, as the new company office. With a growing staff and larger location, the company focused on land development, surveying and civil engineering projects.

Work was slow but steady and the company portfolio continued to diversify.

However, a national economic recession was looming and its impact affected companies of all sizes and industries. The recession also affected the firm.

According to Stan Novak, PE, principal and director of quality assurance & quality control, and a company employee since 1989, "Between 1990 and 1991, we were forced to reduce our staff and work a three-day work week as projects were scarce. There was no traffic study work for Eve and she took other jobs to make ends meet. But we stuck it out and we survived, in part because we persevered and took the jobs no one else wanted. Our early days may have been like a frat house in many ways, but we had the right mix of people and we were willing to sacrifice whatever we had to in order to get through the recession and tough times."

In 1991, BL Companies added landscape architecture services and in 1995 moved to the DeMatteo Building at 2911 Dixwell Avenue in Hamden, Connecticut. The Victorian house and supplemental workspace that was being leased at Corporate Ridge industrial park in Hamden had become insufficient.

Says Jennifer Marks, LS, principal and director of land surveying, and an employee since 1992, "As a company we earned great respect and loyalty in our profession. We are strong at relationship building and we have never had a blemish on how we operate our business. The skills and integrity of our staff have kept our reputation in tact. This is evident in the quality of our work."

Between 1996 and 1998 the company added structural engineering, architecture, environmental sciences and MEP engineering services to create a fully integrated architecture, engineering and environmental services company. With the addition of architecture and the formation of BL Alliance, architect David Ball, AIA, joined the company as the principal of architecture and co-owner of BL Alliance, the architecture entity at BL Companies.

Reflecting on that point in time, Bob Landino says, "We were fortunate to have secured a number of projects with national and international companies in the early to late 90s. The first project in this category was probably Trolley Square Stop & Shop in East Haven. Others included Taco Bell, Candlewood Suites, Red Lobster, Olive Garden and McDonalds."

Bob continues, "Our quality of delivery was key to meeting the increasing demands of these companies. A natural progression to open new office locations followed. We had an ongoing interest in expanding beyond Connecticut into the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. We also opened but subsequently closed offices in Detroit, Tampa, Pittsburgh, Richmond and Virginia Beach. We were successful in opening and maintaining our six current regional offices – Harrisburg, Poughkeepsie, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Manhattan and Hartford. This geographic diversification also enabled our emergence into new markets. For example, we secured projects with Hoys Cinema, RiteAid and Whole Foods, and we were selected as an on-call transportation engineer for the Connecticut Department of Transportation in the late 1990s."

In the first 10 years of the firm, the staff increased from a handful of employees to about 50 and the annual revenue topped \$6.5 million. In February 1998, the company relocated to its current corporate headquarters at 355 Research Parkway in Meriden, Connecticut.

According to John Mancini, principal and director of civil, transportation and landscape architecture, and a company employee since 1989, "We were viewed as a husband and wife shop internally and externally until our move to Meriden. As we transitioned, grew and became more established in our field, we reemerged as a company viewed as more than just two people. We started as a company of people who had job titles, not just job responsibilities and we changed immensely. We added new disciplines over time and even doubled in size between 1997 and 1999."

He continues, "While much has changed in the past 20 years, one thing has remained constant and that is our company's youthfulness and enthusiasm. We have a strong work ethic that we'll run through a wall for our clients. Without that fabric we couldn't have accomplished what we have. People have viewed us, and I'm sure they will continue to do so, as a cut above everyone else. We are proud of that perception ... and reality."

BL Companies turned a new page in ownership and leadership in 2001. Eve and Bob parted ways, Eve stepped down as president and left the company, and Bob became the sole proprietor of BL Companies, survey, Cop-Eze and Tethys. David Ball and Bob Landino continued their partnership in BL Alliance. As president and CEO, Bob led the company at an accelerated pace into new ventures.

In 2005, the diverse companies were consolidated into one. This allowed for the addition of 12 new stakeholders. The new entity was named BL Companies, Inc. with Bob Landino as CEO/chairman, David Ball as president.

The following year, BL Companies became an employee-owned company and established an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). The ESOP is an employee retirement benefit plan that provides all employees with the opportunity to own company stock without having to pay for it. In 2007, the firm added 25 new principals to the firm. This group of existing employees joined the ranks of the company's existing 12 principals.

What has made, and continues to make, BL Companies the company it is ... is people. Those people, whether past or present, continue to strengthen BL Companies, along with determination, dedication, hard work, vision, loyalty and an exceptional focus on clients, services and the future.