

CAREER BUILDER

Brownsville native climbs the ladder with big-time construction contractor



BRAD DOHERTY/THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Rene Capistran is the vice president of construction contractor Spaw Glass. Capistran is overseeing construction of the Science Technology Learning center Tuesday at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College campus.

BY STEVE CLARK
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Rene Capistran wasn't a model student, but he turned out pretty well anyway. At 38, the Brownsville native is vice president of the South Texas Region for SpawGlass, a \$500 million-a-year building contractor, with offices in Austin, Harlingen, Houston and San Antonio.

The firm built the McAllen convention center, is building the Brownsville Sports Park and has projects under way at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College. The contractor also does work for the University of Texas-Pan American and the Texas A&M system.

"I wasn't the greatest student," he concedes. "I just got by. I wasn't really focused. I didn't know what I wanted. I wasn't the most disciplined kid to sit down and do my homework and all that."

Today, Capistran counsels students to go the other direction: Stay in school, study hard, go to college, get a degree, find a career you love.

"For my mother and father, they felt that you've made it if

you've graduated through high school," he says. "Maybe back then maybe that was OK. Today even with a college degree it's tough to get a job."

Capistran gets to speak to students through his work with United Way of Southern Cameron County, one of several non-profit boards he's involved with. Capistran is this year's United Way fundraising chairman, earning rave reviews from United Way director Traci Wickett, who describes him as a relentless and innovative fund raiser.

"I take time from work and I'll go do three or four presentations a day at BISD," Capistran says. "I get to go back and see some of my old teachers, and I get to thank them."

Capistran, who worked his way up through SpawGlass to take over the vice president's job two years ago, was born and raised in Brownsville, graduated from Porter High School and worked for the family business, Capistran's Tortillas. He served in the Navy for four years, then worked for the sheriff's department in Forth Worth

and later for the South Padre Island police department.

But contracting always beckoned.

"My calling has always been construction," Capistran says. "My father was in construction. Growing up through the years and always being a handyman, it was something I wanted to get back to."

He went to work for his brothers' small construction firm, then started his own business, which he ran for several years before joining SpawGlass about nine years ago as a project manager. Once he arrived, Capistran's education began anew.

The company prefers to grow its executive leadership from within the ranks rather than hire from outside. SpawGlass University, a program that offers training in all aspects of the industry from entry- to executive-levels, is a manifestation of this philosophy. Employees with leadership potential are identified early and cultivated. Capistran was one of them. The company has shipped him off to the prestigious

Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University for several courses.

"The company's always focused on education," he says. "I've been through so many seminars and so many schools while I've been with SpawGlass. You've got to understand our culture. We're 100 percent employee-owned, so we have a lot of vested interest in our employees."

Executives aren't allowed to get too comfortable, however. When Capistran took the regional vice president's job, it was with the understanding that he'd have to move on — and ideally up — after five or six years and let somebody else take over. The next step is president.

"To be president I must be successful for three years in a row," he says. "I'm on my second year. Knock on wood, I've been blessed and been very fortunate. We've done very good down here in South Texas, and South Texas is a very tough market."

PLEASE SEE GLASS, C2

supplier in place before the deal was signed, Penske couldn't run the

dealer once Saturn dealerships close, GM said. Stephen Spivey, senior

executive said he's concerned for his employees and still hopes the deal can be resurrected.

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Although new private sector projects have largely dried up due to the recession, SpawGlass still has plenty of municipal clients, and a pipeline full of projects through 2010. This puts the firm on sounder footing than many of its peers around the country. Capistran says the company has managed to avoid laying off any employees.

And while he hopes his lectures today gain traction with students, Capistran admits that the best advice he ever got

sank in later than he would have wished. It came from his dad, who died in 2006.

"My father was a very hard man growing up, very strict, but ended up being my best friend before he passed on," Capistran says. "Unfortunately I didn't get to spend much time with him because I was so busy with the company."

About a week before he passed away, the elder Capistran called his son with a few pieces of advice, among them "never forget where you came from" and "it's always better to give." It didn't register right away, but soon enough it would lead Capistran to

"change who I was" and devote himself to the community as his father had always done.

"At the time I said, 'Yeah, yeah, OK, dad. Sure, thanks,'" Capistran says. "My father passed on a week later. It was at that time that I realized what he was telling me, because I had already forgotten my family. I'd forgotten what was important to me, and that really slowed me down. It was that that turned everything for me. My father was very good to the community. He was always helping everyone. I knew that day that I wanted to be half the man my father was."

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