

ROOSEVELT PETRY JR.



Entrepreneur *from* the start

by Brian Sattler

As president and CEO of GP Industrial Contractors Inc., Roosevelt Petry Jr. '82, '96, of Port Arthur builds refineries and petrochemical plants. Specializing in piping, steel fabrication, carpentry, janitorial, hole watch/fire watch, warehousing, project management, maintenance and engineering, GP Industrial has served customers in Texas, Louisiana, Oregon and New Mexico, as well as internationally in Canada, India and Belize. Together with his wife, Marlene (Captain) '95, who is senior vice president of the company, Petry has grown the business, become its sole owner and earned a reputation as a force for positive change in the communities of Southeast Texas. "I put my faith in God first because if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be doing any of this stuff," Petry said.

Born in Beaumont as the eldest of four children, Petry has had an entrepreneurial bent since childhood. Growing up in nearby Cheek, he and his sister "would find old soda bottles, wash them out and collect the refunds at the grocery store," Petry said.

When he was 9 and his sister 7, the two began a business mowing lawns. "We would cut the grass at the car wash, the neighbor's yards, the convenience store," he said. "It was great because as little kids they'd often give us something to eat or drink, too."

"We were making \$20 a yard, and that was a lot of money back then," Petry said. "So after school, we might cut a couple of yards and on weekends do four or five."

Petry graduated from cutting yards to helping his uncles remodel houses, experience he later parlayed into building houses on his own.

While in high school, Petry developed a new venture—installing peepholes in doors, which later expanded to include installing deadbolt locks and ceiling fans. "I was the kind of kid who would learn how to do something, and then I would get other people to do it for me," he said.

"At one time, I had eight or nine guys installing peepholes. We had tackle boxes with a drill in the bottom, and a tray was full of peepholes to take to apartment complexes in Houston. We'd go knocking on doors and installing peepholes. We easily would make \$400 to \$500 on a weekend."

Petry graduated from Hebert High School in 1980 and earned an associate degree in drafting from Lamar University in 1982. He went to work for Bethlehem Steel, performing piping, mechanical, electrical and structural drafting.

He learned of Marlene through a mutual friend, but the couple first met when he took the initiative and introduced

himself at Howard's Grocery in Port Arthur, where she worked. "Her first words to me were 'you need a haircut,'" Petry said. "I had an Afro at the time. It was working for me, but she thought differently." The couple married in 1987 and made their home in Beaumont.

Soon after they married, Roosevelt built a "snack shack" that Marlene operated, providing hot lunches for students at Port Arthur's Lincoln High School. "We stayed busy, but when they went to a 'closed campus,' that ended," Petry said.

Marlene later decided to pursue a career in nursing and earned an associate's degree in that field from LU in 1995. She went on to obtain a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston and a master's degree in nursing education from Regis University. She worked as an intensive care nurse in Stafford and as an education resource specialist at Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston. Today, she is senior vice president of GP Industrial Contractors.

When vinyl siding became popular, Petry was soon working four or five projects at a time, at a price far below the competition, and "still making very good money." He came up with an innovative approach that would enhance the appearance of a one-story home. "From the outside, it would look like it was two-story. It was selling like hotcakes," he said. "People liked that look. We were making \$12,000 to \$15,000 a house, and we did a bunch of houses," he said. In addition, he also worked in an area refinery until an injury there prompted him to return to Lamar, where he earned a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering.

He had his sights set on going to law school, but, four years after graduating from Lamar, he had a conversation with Morris Albright Jr. about the idea of opening up a minority business to help Albright's business, Gulf Copper, secure more work with area refineries and chemical plants. Soon, Albright and Petry joined with Pat (Simmons) Guillory '88 and Joe Deshotel '74 in business.

"You can see that I'm a minority," Petry said. "I don't want to highlight that I'm a

minority. What I want to highlight is that we can get you a competitive price, that we can meet your schedule, that we can get you the quality you're looking for and that we can save you money," Petry said.

"If I got a job because I was a minority, that's a temporary, a short-term relationship. I felt that if I got in because I could save you some money, that I could meet your schedule in a safe way and give you quality work, that's what would build a long-term relationship. That's what has made GP successful," Petry said.

The first partner Petry bought out was Deshotel, followed by Gulf Copper and, eight or nine years ago, Guillory.

Today, GP Industrial Contractors Inc. is headquartered in Port Arthur and has fabrication facilities in Port Arthur, Vidor and Henderson. With more than 76,000 square feet of shop space and 375 employees, the company has done projects for ExxonMobil, Motiva, Enterprise Products, DOW Chemical and many other companies, as well as Houston's Minute Maid Park and Toyota Center. Beaumont residents benefited from GP's work on DeQueen, Fehl-Price and Jones-Clark elementary schools.

"The transition from a strictly domestic company to an international one is a lot of work," Petry said. "Meeting people, building relationships, putting business plans together. I got a lot of help from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and I also took a class on entrepreneurship. One really valuable thing I learned was a strategy to limit risk through business insurance." GP Industrial Contractors has expanded its reach, becoming a global company through projects in Canada, Belize and India.

"Even while you're trying to get your business started, learn to give back," Petry advises. "Don't forget to give back. Make a habit of giving all the time, always sharing. And by that, I don't always mean money; sometimes it's best to give of your time or advice."

Petry takes his own advice to heart. In recent years, he has served as chairman of the Port Arthur Economic Development

Corp., chairman of the Port Arthur Board of Commissioners Housing Authority, vice president of the Construction Board of Construction and Appeals, vice president of the Clean Community Commission, member of the Port Arthur Citizen Advisory Committee,

During the years, Petry's hard work and community involvement have resulted in numerous honors and awards.

Industrial Business of the Year, LSC-PA, 2002

Emerging Ten Award, Houston Minority Business Council, 2004

Humanitarian Award, Make Ready, Inc., 2004

Business of the Year, Port Arthur Economic Development Corp., 2006

Businessman of the Year, Score, 2007

Humanitarian Award, KSAP 107.1, 2007

United States House of Representatives Community Involvement, Congressman Ted Poe, 2007

Texas Legislature, Business and Community Service Achievements, 2011

President's Award, LSC-PA, 2012

Outstanding Texan Award, Texas Legislative Black Caucus, 2013

Top 50 Black Professionals and Entrepreneurs, 2013

National Society of Black Engineers, Ever Ready Lodge No. 506, Port Arthur Rotary Club, and on the board of directors for Junior Achievement and United Way.

Petry recently gave a lecture on campus about what led to his business success. His mother, Cewillow Catherine Richard Petry, attended and has reason to be proud of each of her children. In addition to Petry, all are graduates: Pamela '89 and Mary Yolanda '93 and Eric '95.