

FROM DIRT TO DONE

Design-build company *Danto Builders* is a client's one-stop shop

by Brittany Kühn

Craig Danto, CEO of South Florida-based *Danto Builders, LLC*, comes from a long line of builders. His great-grandfather was a ship builder in Spain, his grandfather poured thousands of yards of concrete at Detroit Metro Airport runways in the 1950s and his father, nicknamed Crazy Horse, was an underground utility contractor, developer and builder.

Craig grew up just outside of Detroit, where his father's Michigan-based company, Danto Builders (separate from his son's business), and a local excavating company were responsible for putting in 5 square miles of sewage lift stations so the land could be developed for what would

become a community of houses, schools, restaurants and gas stations.

"The hole they had to dig was 120 feet deep and the circumference of that hole was over a quarter of a mile, so it was no small task," Craig recalls.

His family ended up living in a housing development directly above that giant hole, which is how it came to pass that Craig was raised in the center of the town that his father helped build.

With such a history, it's no surprise that Craig's career followed in those footsteps—but with a notable exception:



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Danto Builders, LLC took on a large project for the Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport Administration, which involved a building addition as well as major interior and exterior renovations.



“It’s always a feel-good project when you get to see a venture go from dirt to done. I get excited about finding land and developing it to its best and highest use.”

Craig Danto, CEO and Co-Owner,
Danto Builders, LLC



Proud Danto Builders, LLC Owners Craig and Debbie Danto have tackled hundreds of high-end residential, high-rise, commercial, industrial and government projects in the South Florida region.



“I grew up pushing pipe and pulling mud,” he reflects. “But eventually I got tired of working underground, so I went above ground and started building up.”

Build up, he did. Today, Craig and his wife, Debbie, are proud owners of Danto Builders, LLC, a general contracting, design-build and construction management company that’s tackled hundreds of high-end residential, high-rise, commercial, industrial and government projects in the South Florida region.

The husband-wife duo run an impressive one-stop shop of offerings—from development and design to subcontractor qualification and selection, as well as budgetary, construction and project management services—to help clients carry out virtually any project.

“Craig has evolved his career from horizontal to both horizontal and vertical,” Debbie says. “We’re capable of a wide range of projects and services, including design, which I think is unique in itself. Not many

builders can be good at all the things we tackle.”

AN EYE FOR DESIGN

Developing that range didn’t happen overnight—while building was in his blood, Craig’s work in design began 40 years ago when he moved to Boca Raton, Florida, and became partners with an architect named Digby Bridges.

The two established a company called Danbridge Construction and started with 10,000-square-foot homes that Digby would design and Craig would build. They grew exponentially from there.

“For eight years, we did many high-end custom homes together,” Craig says. “Then I started getting into commercial work because clients whom I built homes for wanted their offices done.”

As he continued his pursuit of commercial and residential work, Craig founded Danto Builders in 1980, which became an LLC in the early 2000s.

He also met his wife, Debbie, who was a business consultant. After dating and getting engaged, Debbie joined the business—and “started to get into his business, too,” she says laughing.

In the last several years, Danto Builders transitioned to being a certified woman-owned business—51% owned by Debbie and 49% by Craig, and they now efficiently and effectively complete both private and public projects.

The team has an architect on staff and a partnership with engineering



The Danto Builders, LLC team (from left to right): Mason Courtney, Hugo Fontalvo, Mariana De Souza, Debbie Danto, Craig Danto, David Pollio, Vincent Pollio and furry mascots Lola, Elvis, Arturo and Bella.

firm All Phase Engineering Services, which covers civil, structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing and fire inspection design as well as 179D energy tax certifications required for the \$1.80-per-square-foot federal tax deduction for commercial building owners and designers of government-owned buildings.

Danto Builders can do it all, but Debbie emphasizes that they consider themselves to be a design-build firm that offers end-to-end services for clients.

“We understand how all the pieces go together, and create that experience for our clients,” she says. “Craig has an engineer’s mind, so he understands how things go together structurally. At the same time, he’s great at design. So, he’s very good at collaborating with the engineers and architects, and he knows how to put it all together.”

GOING VERTICAL

When asked about their range of projects, the Dantos effortlessly list off the Rollingwood Manor Apartments in Flint, Michigan, the Clarendon oceanfront condos in Highland Beach, Florida, and a medical center in Boynton Beach, Florida, to name a few.

While they specialize in the hospitality and health care industries, for Debbie, there are some government projects that stand out above the rest.

One is the Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport Administration building, which involved a building addition and major interior and exterior renovations. She notes the team effort required to see it through to completion—including airport management, the Federal Aviation Administration, the city of Fort Lauderdale, engineers, architects and others.

“When you’re dealing with that many entities, you really have to have your act together,” she says. “I’m proud of our team for their ability to work together and get that project done on time and within budget, despite unforeseen challenges and while under intense scrutiny.”

Debbie also cites the Kirk Cottrell Pavilion project in Deerfield Beach, Florida, a building named after a well-known icon in the area who founded and operated Island Water Sports and passed away tragically in a surfing accident in South Africa. His family still owns and operates the business and remains very involved in the community.



Danto Builders, LLC was tasked with demolishing an existing pavilion in Deerfield Beach, Florida, and building a new two-story structure with site improvements for beachgoers. The new structure is named after local icon Kirk Cottrell.

Danto Builders was tasked with demolishing the existing pavilion and building the new two-story structure with site improvements, to serve as a memorial for beachgoers.

“This project has some really special elements,” says Debbie, referring to the roof line of the building that’s curved like the ocean. “There were some structural challenges to that, so we relied on a great project manager and in-house architect to collaborate with the design professionals. On government jobs, your team has to be really sharp, so that’s why I’m proud of that project.”

Craig gets nostalgic when he reflects on his career favorites. One was the Clarendon in Highland Beach, a 14-story beachfront condominium that involved financing the project, doing a land assembly and obtaining city approval for the plans before his team built and sold the building to a group in New York.

Another project involved developing a high-end, 20-acre residential

community called Fox Landing in Boca Raton, Florida. There were no roads accessing the land, so in addition to developing the property, Danto Builders had to construct 2,000 feet of four-lane highway as well.

“It’s always a feel-good project when you get to see a venture go from dirt to done,” Craig says. “I get excited about finding land and developing it to its best and highest use.”

That joyful approach to challenging projects has paid off.

The Dantos maintain clients such as North Perry Airport, the Broward County Sheriff’s Office and Broward County Public Schools, and have been recognized with awards from AIA’s Fort Lauderdale chapter, South Florida Business Journal, Gold Coast Builders Association and Architectural Digest. Danto Builders was also honored with the 2019 Salute to Business “Broward Business” Award by the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce.

A FAMILY-ORIENTED TEAM

When asked what makes the company special, Craig responds with a smile, “That would be Debbie Danto.”

While the two appear to be each other’s biggest cheerleaders, they both say their jobs would be impossible without their capable team of office staff, estimators, project managers, superintendents and subcontractors.



Left to right: Fort Lauderdale City Commissioner of District 4 Ben Sorensen, Craig and Debbie Danto, Fort Lauderdale Vice Mayor of District 3 Robert McKinzie and Special Olympics athlete Fernando Nunez Jr. at the Big Bad BBQ Bash in 2019.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY, INC. (TOP); DANTO BUILDERS, LLC (BOTTOM)

“We have a diverse but dedicated team of individuals who are like-minded,” Craig says. “We’re also very family-oriented and flexible with our team when it comes to their families.”

Mariana De Souza, Danto Builders’ Office Manager and bookkeeper, can attest to that.

She started at the company eight years ago as a receptionist, worked her way through school to earn her finance degree and now handles everything from managing the office to invoices, applications, payroll, contracts and more.

When Mariana had a baby, she was able to work from home the first few months and when she returned, her office was converted into a nursery so that she could bring her son to work with her.

“They’ve really supported me in everything, and they treat us all like family,” Mariana says. “I don’t see a lot of companies like that.”

Another employee who can attest to the work environment is Hugo Fontalvo, a former Marine who spent more than 26 years in law enforcement before coming to work for Danto Builders as a Project Manager.

“They really care for their employees,” he says. “Craig loves to cook and serve, so if we have a big meeting, he wants to feed everyone and make a small feast for the team.”

HEART AND SOUL

That theme of serving others extends to the community as well, according to Hugo.

“They truly want to make a difference and they lead by example,” he says. “They’re involved in the community, but they also open the door for others to become a part of that. It really sends a signal that we should all have a heart to help others.”

Craig and Debbie are both active with a range of professional and community organizations, such as the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce, Riverwalk Fort Lauderdale, Fort Lauderdale Design and Construction Professionals, AIA Fort Lauderdale, and the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association.



Committee members of the Big Bad BBQ Bash that supports Special Olympics Florida. Shown in the foreground are Debbie and Craig Danto, the leaders of Danto Builders, LLC, which has sponsored this annual charitable event for the last six years.

Debbie serves on the boards and councils of many of those organizations, and she was recently honored at the Rebuilding Together Broward County event for demonstrating industry and community leadership through her daily virtues of integrity, dignity and community service.

“We get to know our clients on a personal level and we hope to become friends with them during and after the process of working with them,” Debbie says. “We’ve gotten so involved with the community because we care and it’s an extension of taking a personal interest in our clients. We want to provide the best-quality service for them.”

Of all their affiliations, however, it’s hard to top their support of the Special Olympics Florida organization. For the last six years, Danto Builders has hosted an event called the Big Bad BBQ Bash, which boasted 1,200 attendees last year and has raised a total of \$150,000.

It’s a cause that’s close to their hearts. Both Debbie and Craig have family members with Down syndrome.

Military Heroes Support Foundation volunteers at the Special Olympics Big Bad BBQ Bash hosted by Danto Builders, LLC.



“Instead of just writing a check, we came up with the Big Bad BBQ idea,” Debbie says, noting that every year they’ve doubled attendance. “We’ve just poured our hearts and souls into it.”

BRINGING JOY TO THE JOB

Indeed, the Dantos appear to pour their hearts and souls into everything they do—and they seem to have fun while doing it.

“One thing people always say is that Craig is so funny and makes people laugh,” Debbie says. “When he meets with subcontractors or clients, he’s always making people smile, and he makes it fun for everybody, even when it’s challenging.”

As a fourth-generation builder who’s gone from “pushing pipe and pulling mud” to developing luxury high-rises from the ground up, Craig admits it’s easy to smile when you’re doing what you love.

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Debbie Danto, COO and Co-Owner,
Danto Builders, LLC

“I just enjoy building; it’s my thing,” he says. “I take pride in it and I want to do it again and again. I just want to keep everyone happy as we continue to build this company.”

At the end of the day, he says, it’s all in the company’s internal mission statement: “Have fun, make mon’, and get the job done.” 🐼

Brittany Kühn is a journalist and award-winning communications professional specializing in topics ranging from aerospace to innovative technologies.