

Hispanic contractor to build apartments

\$1.8 million project one of biggest ever for minority firm

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About 16 years ago, Ed Rios had a disagreement with his guidance counselor at McCaskey High School.

Rios wanted to go to vo-tech school, but his counselor wanted him to take a college path.

"In those days, if you went to vocational school, people thought you were a trouble-maker," Rios said.

But with the announcement that he has landed one of the largest building contracts ever awarded in Lancaster County to a minority-owned firm, Rios' high school decision should get an A-plus.

His company, E.R. Specialties, 13 E. Lemon St., has been named general contractor on a \$1.8 million project to build 24 one-bedroom apartments for senior citizens in Landisville.

The building is the second phase of the Landisville Apartments project that began in 1998 with renovation of the former Samuel N. Mumma Tobacco Warehouse, a four-story brick structure built on Elizabeth Street in 1914.

The new building, which should be completed in about nine months, will be attached to the southern end

of the old structure, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Mumma Apartments Associates Inc. of Lancaster is the developer of the project, which is being financed by Fulton Bank, the Lancaster County Redevelopment Authority, the state Neighborhood Assistance Program and the Affordable Housing Program of Federal Home Loan Bank.

That's a pretty heady slate of institutions for a guy who originally had trouble breaking into the local construction industry because of his Hispanic heritage, Rios said.

"I had to break through the barrier. The only way around it was to go into business for myself. There weren't that many Hispanic contractors around.

Rios, 32, had worked for other contractors but soon realized if he wanted to rise to the top, he had to start there—as the owner of his own company.

"It was one of my goals. When you put your mind to something, you can accomplish it," he said. "It was a struggle to get to this point, but we're here."

Starting with small jobs, Rios began networking and

was able to make a name for himself.

"It makes me feel happy and excited," he said. "We have nine employees and a lot of minority participation. We're just trying to strive and keep up."

Rios' company is involved with five different projects in New Holland, Reading and Harrisburg.

"But we're always looking for more," he said.

Rios said he feels it is his duty to lend a hand to others, who, like him, are having a hard time finding an open door in the business.

"That's another barrier we've broken. Especially with Hispanics who don't speak English—it's hard to break into construction. We've taken guys on who want to break in.

"Now, about half of the guys who work for us are bilingual, and the ones who aren't are learning."

Rios' company has developed a reputation for giving local Hispanics an opportunity they might not otherwise have. "I've never had to advertise," he said. "Just about everybody we've hired has been by word of mouth. It's been working out for us."



Ed Rios

Even as a young boy in Lancaster, Rios said, he knew he wanted to do something with his hands, to build things. He received support from his parents.

"My parents thought it was a good thing. I knew what I wanted. I knew I didn't want to be in an office, I wanted to be moving around," he said.

His next goal is to be the developer of his own project, possibly a building with affordable housing or the renovation of a historic structure.

"It's a little more challenging to turn an older building into something useful," he said.

But whatever the final plan turns out to be, there is a project he would like to complete with his 5-year-old son, Ed Jr.

"I want to drive around and show him the things I've built."