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Safewall[®] found niche in stormproof rooms

Revenue has grown with interest in solid-poured concrete homes.

By LIZ FLAISIG, The Times-Union

Ken Krantz knows a viable business venture when he sees one.



DON BURK
The Times-Union

Ken Krantz, founder and president of Safewall Concrete Systems, stands outside the door of a storm room constructed of poured concrete walls and ceiling in a concrete home being built off Normandy Boulevard on Jacksonville's Westside. The storm room can withstand winds of 300 to 400 miles per hour, Krantz said.

Three years ago, he watched Mercedes Homes pouring solid concrete homes in Orange Park.

That experience and his contracting background convinced Krantz there was room for competition in an industry slow to change its construction materials.

In 2003, the Michigan native formed Safewall Concrete Systems LLC, a company specializing in storm rooms and waiting for a patent on its method of pouring concrete directly against wood.

In its first year, the company saw about \$2 million in revenue, Krantz said.

That has grown into \$10 million in annual revenue as interest in solid poured concrete brought jobs as large as homes at Nocatee and as small as a 2,500 square foot home under construction off Normandy Boulevard on Jacksonville's Westside.

The Westside home's walls were poured in three days, including a storm room that can withstand 300 to 400 mile per hour winds, Krantz said.

Safewall can also add a solid concrete storm room onto an existing home or build a special concrete structure to protect a recreational vehicle from storms, as it did at the Westside home site.

The homebuilding industry has historically moved from concrete block after World War II to wood in the 1960s.

In recent years, Florida's hurricanes have led some builders to use concrete more often because of its durability and tendency not to leak like concrete block might.

That trend and the stabilization of concrete prices have worked to Krantz's advantage, leading to jobs like the eight homes his company has built in Pensacola for Rebuild Northwest Florida.

The company will also begin building affordable housing in Jacksonville with a nonprofit group Krantz helped form, Rebuild Jax Inc., and the Yield Foundation.

Although Krantz estimated a concrete home would be about 2 to 3 percent higher in cost than a \$200,000 wood home, its energy efficiency, wind resistance and other benefits close that gap.

Another reason for the company's growth could be Krantz's business model, which includes using local structural engineers for both quality and support of the housing industry in Northeast Florida.

As for reaching new customers, it has cost Safewall little in marketing expenses.

"We market to homeowners rather than builders, so it's by word of mouth," Krantz said.

"We expect 15 jobs from just this one home."

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