

Keri Matthews

St. Augustine, Florida



Matthews Design Group, Inc

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Keri Matthews:

Founded in June of 2005 by husband and wife, Rob and Keri Matthews, Matthews Design Group (MDG) has grown from a two-person operation to a regional powerhouse providing civil engineering and land development services to a variety of both public and private customers. Keri shared the journey from when she and Rob first moved to Florida to when they launched and began to grow the business.

"Rob and I first met while attending Clemson University," Keri said. "After we graduated, we lived in Charlotte for a while before moving to St. Augustine, purely for lifestyle reasons, in 2000. I was fortunate to get a transfer to the Jacksonville office for the company I was working for at the time. Rob found a civil engineering job in St. Augustine. Over the next few years, Rob worked for three local firms and became a partner at the third firm. Unfortunately, that firm was small and did not have a

good vibe. He wasn't happy with how it was being run and knew he could do better. Along the way, we befriended a developer who encouraged us to start our own firm and promised us business if we did so. In June of 2005, we took the leap."

From startup to second-stage

As Keri shared, the decision was nerve racking, but they both had confidence in their abilities and knew they could create something that was "fresh, had a good feeling, and was different from other firms". The first few years were great, and work was easily coming in the door. From 2005 to 2008, Rob and Keri grew the business, added 16 employees, purchased a larger building to house their growing staff and put in many late nights to build a solid reputation. The journey, for the most part, had been free of any major obstacles. Then the recession hit and everything came to a screeching halt.

"The recession was by far our biggest challenge," Keri said. "Our biggest client called and told us their work was being put on hold. Other projects were also put on hold or completely canceled. At one point we had over \$400,000 in accounts receivable owed to us. Our clients were in the same bind we were in, so they could not pay. It was a real domino effect for the industry. We had to reevaluate every aspect of our business down to the cost of pens. Letting staff go was very difficult, as we dwindled to only 4 people in addition to ourselves. We were in survival mode and had to come up with creative solutions to streamline the business and bring money in the door. We rented out the upstairs space to a law firm, used our copiers and plotters to provide printing services, and became certified to do Forensic Engineering all as ways to bring in

additional revenue. At the lowest point, we did have to use personal money to stay afloat. We ran up our home equity line to its maximum limit and didn't take a paycheck for three years. It was scary, but we lived by one of Rob's favorite quotes, 'Failure is not an option'. We just kept moving forward by re-assessing, re-inventing, and re-creating to create a much leaner and stronger company."

The recession also forced Rob and Keri to diversify their portfolio. Prior to the recession, their portfolio was 100% private work. They knew the key to survival was securing public work, so they wrote their first RFP for a 3-year county continuing services contract. When they were selected as one of the awardees, according to Keri, this was a turning point for MDG. They worked hard on the first small county projects they were awarded and established a great relationship with the county. This led to receiving more work from the county, which also helped MDG start to win other municipal contracts. Rob and Keri learned a lot from the economic downturn and, as a result, are now a much more streamlined and efficient company relying on cash and not debt to grow. They're also much more diversified with their mix of public and private projects.

Keeping a competitive edge

MDG is a full-service civil engineering firm that provides land development, roadway, utility and stormwater design, and landscape architecture services to both public and private clients. MDG's projects come in all types and sizes and can be anything from a small office, to large subdivisions, to schools or health care facilities, to large commercial projects like the Amazon Distribution Center in Jacksonville, to roadways, or even boat ramps, airport runways, or your neighborhood

ball field. As Keri shared, "Before you can build anything, you need an engineer to design the ground to include things like optimal grading, drainage, utilities, and landscaping. We do not design the building, but we design a solid foundation for the building(s) or road to be built upon." Instead of just looking at projects from the raw engineering that needs to be done, they view each project as a blank canvas on which to create an engineering masterpiece. "We take the more creative, innovative approach to projects, and often find creative solutions that maximize space, improve functionality or aesthetics, or maybe save our clients time or money. We go beyond the raw design to really create a unique value add for our clients."

Keri shared what MDG is doing to diversify their portfolio and how a well-balanced, positive, talented and fun workforce has defined their workplace culture. "We're going after more and more public work, especially Florida Department of Transportation work," she said. "We have a lot of work in St. Johns County, but we want to increase our market-share in surrounding counties."

We are very proud of the culture of MDG and it is something we work hard to preserve. Our people truly are MDG and we feel our culture and employees are what set us apart from our competition. We foster self-management by giving our employees the respect, freedom, and tools they need to thrive, and empower our employees to speak up, share ideas, and take part in making MDG better. We also work with employees that need flexibility with hours or working from home. The positive vibe in our office and our culture helps us to attract and maintain the best talent. When we hire, we look for both an exceptional skill set as well as a great personality. Smart, genuinely nice people

make for a great office environment and excellent customer service. We help foster team-building and camaraderie through fun lunchtime "grill and chills" in our parking lot, outings to restaurants, a yearly state of the company luncheon event, an August family Beach Blast with food and games and a January 'After Holiday Ho-Down' family party with games, food and a bonfire. We work hard, but we have fun and we reward employees for their efforts."

Notable community contributions

MDG is also heavily involved in philanthropic activities and wholeheartedly believes in giving back to the community in a number of ways. Through their "MDG Gives Back" program, they donate engineering services to non-profit agencies like Home Again St. Johns, Alpha Omega Miracle Home, St. Augustine Youth Services, Kids Bridge, ARC of St. Johns, Children's Museum, Boys and Girls Club, and multiple charter schools and churches to name a few. MDG also sponsors a long list of fundraising events (over \$18K in sponsorships so far this year) to the aforementioned in addition to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, Investing in Kids, Flagler Hospital, Pink up the Pace, Seamark Ranch, Junior Service League, and more. Rob and Keri also participate on local service boards and organizations. Rob is on the services board for Flagler Hospital, is Chairman of the St. Johns County Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Council, is Board President of The Arc of the St. Johns, and an active member of St. Augustine Rotary. Keri is an active member of the Family Advisory Council at Wolfson Children's Hospital.

What it means to be a Florida Companies to Watch Honoree

"We're very excited and honored," she said. "It means a lot to have that distinction. I think it helps us break out of the small local firm perception that some people might have. It's like when a NY Times Best Selling Book is announced, you're more likely to pay attention to it and give it a try. We take a lot of pride in what we have created, and the employees are equally as excited. It's really a testament to their hard work and commitment to providing excellence in their designs and customer service each day.

I think we were selected because of our growth and the unique, positive firm we have created together with our employees. It starts with our people and the engineering masterpieces they're creating. We can't do what we do without our employees. They're like extended family. They, along with our immediately family, have been so supportive and have helped shape MDG throughout this journey. It also comes down to our quality and strong reputation. This reputation has led to repeat clients and referrals, which has led to a steady increase in workload year after year, which has led to growth, which has led to this award. It is a domino effect that starts with our people."

Looking ahead, Keri and Rob are focused on expanding. They want to maintain their workplace culture while moving beyond the small-firm mentality. As a mid-size firm, MDG is throwing their hat in the ring with larger firms. They've transitioned to a powerful integrated accounting, project management, and CRM software, and added both a Director of Marketing and Director of Landscape Architecture as part of their process of expansion and diversification. As they increase their geographic footprint, opening new offices in other counties and

Jacksonville is not out of the question. They're also looking at adding surveying capabilities. As Keri shared, they've been held up in the past waiting for surveying to be completed on various jobs. With in-house surveying, they can control their own destiny and keep those projects from stalling.

Advice for aspiring entrepreneurs

What advice does Keri have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "Reach out to others that have done it before you," she said. "Learn from someone else's ups and downs. This helps to paint a realistic picture. Remember, entrepreneurship is not eight to five and you will wear many different hats. Beware of overextending your capital needs and getting too many loans. Sure it's scary, but it's well worth it. The first three years are the hardest. Have the mentality that failure is not an option and keep working hard. When you make it, you'll have more freedom than you've ever had before and most of all, you'll have a tremendous amount of pride in what you've created."

Awards and Recognition

