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Bald Eagle performs on Guthrie

Ironworker rises to new heights, thanks to key partnership

Minneapolis / St. Paul Business Journal - by [Ed Welsch](#) Editorial Intern

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Dave Bice inherited two things from his grandfather: a love for the ironworking industry and a relationship with the Sowles family. His love for ironworking helped his company, Blaine-based **Bald Eagle Erectors**, get through the tough first years in an unbending industry. He became friends with Dan Sowles decades ago when his grandfather worked for Dan's father at Sowles Co. Now Bice and Sowles are working together to build the new **Guthrie Theater** and the Minneapolis Central Public Library.



Diana Watters

Partners Dan Sowles, left, Sowles Steel Erectors, and Dave Bice, Bald Eagle Erectors

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Bice started Bald Eagle after 15 years in the industry. An enrolled member of the White Earth Band of Chippewa, he used his contacts to build parking lots at casinos. He went on to build bridges, transformer towers for Xcel Energy and giant tips at Mystic Lake

Casino.

Ironworking is difficult because it takes time to prove oneself, said Charlie Witt, business manager for the Ironworkers Local Union No. 512. "It's kind of a closed community," said Witt. When you are just starting out, general contractors are "not even going to accept a bid from you. You are an unknown quantity," he said.

Bice "has been around long enough so he has a good reputation," said Witt. "He's now probably able to look at larger projects, and when you are starting out, you aren't even going to get a sniff at something like that."

Bice owes "getting a sniff at" the Guthrie and the library to his relationship with Sowles, whose large Minneapolis ironworking company erected the steel for many of the buildings in the Twin Cities' skylines. Bice's grandfather once perched on the skeletons of some of those buildings, riveting steel for Sowles' father. Bice reveres Sowles as a businessman who has always been available for advice. "We have tremendous mutual trust for one another," said Sowles.

The **Metropolitan Economic Development Association's (MEDA)** Construction

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Partnership Program reunited the current generation of the Bice and Sowles families. MEDA's program creates relationships between large construction firms and minority-owned subcontractors. "A lot of them start out very small, so they can't bid on larger projects," said Yvonne Cheung Ho, MEDA's president and CEO.

Landing major projects like the Guthrie takes the sting out of a tough year for Bice. It was his first unprofitable year in 10 years -- his revenue fell to \$3 million from \$3.5 to \$4 million, and he cut his staff to 20 from a peak of 40.

Witt called 2003 "a year of retrenchment" for ironworkers in general. Though many industries improved, commercial construction lagged behind. "Right now we are at the flat spot," said Witt.

"Just learning how to do business" has been the hardest thing for Bice, especially the timing of payments. A subcontracting ironworker pays employees every two weeks, but doesn't get paid himself until about 75 days after the project is done, said Bice. Even then, the general contractor retains 10 percent of the payment until the job is done. Since ironworkers finish their work early in a building's timeframe, they wait a long time before they profit from their work.

Richard Antell, executive director of the Minnesota American Indian Chamber of Commerce, said that in spite of these challenges, Bice "has always been able to make his payrolls and pay his employees on time."

The Chamber recently awarded Bice with the Turtle Award for being a "constant giver" to the Native American community. "Dave has a heart of gold. ... he has done whatever he can to help Indian people," said Antell. Bice grew up in the Minneapolis Little Earth projects, and has gone back to help people there get ironworking jobs. About 30 percent of Bice's staff are Native Americans. "I know a lot of people ... in that neighborhood. I try to give them a chance," said Bice.

Bice has his own chance, working on the Central Library's unique cantilevered ironwork, to gain experience and credibility to set him apart.

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