

Facilitator — June/July 2012



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CRFP Spotlight

Name: Ron Wilhite Title: President and CEO Company/Brand: Regions Facility Services (RFS) City: Brooksville, Fla.

What other restaurant companies have you worked for prior to your current position? As a licensed building contractor for more than 26 years, I have always worked on the vendor side of the restaurant facility business. I do, however, have a number of clients on the restaurant facility and operations side that I have worked for many years.

After spending so much time in restaurants, do you cook? If so, what is your best dish? Despite spending a lot of time in restaurants for work, I love to be in the kitchen at home, too. I am also a big fan of outdoor cooking. A few years ago, I made the switch from a typical charcoal grill to a Big Green Egg cooker. I have absolutely become a fan to this way of cooking, primarily because of the incredibly delicious results. Hardly a weekend goes by where I'm not cooking on the grill. My absolute favorite meal is a very slow-cooked pork butt. After more than 14 hours on the grill, the meat literally falls off the bone and has a moist and delicious flavor.

What was your first car? My first car was a 1973 Toyota FJ 40 Land Cruiser. I lived in Ft. Lauderdale during high school and the Everglades were readily accessible, as long as someone had four-wheel drive. It was a fun first car.

What is your all-time favorite movie? I don't even have to think about this one. "Blazing Saddles" with Mel Brooks, Gene Wilder, Cleavon Little and Harvey Korman is an absolute classic in my movie world. What is the most challenging situation you've ever faced in a facility or on the job? How did you handle it? I have been involved in a number of rather significant restaurant events, such as fires, mold remediation, water intrusion and structural failures. However, the most challenging event I have ever encountered and worked through was, without doubt, after a significant hurricane. When Hurricane Andrew came across South Florida in 1992, I was assigned the task of repairing and reopening two severely damaged restaurants. The challenges of working in an environment with limited power, potable water, building materials, food provisions and even hotels cannot be understated. We accomplished our goals and returned the restaurants to operation, but not without applying some creativity and craftiness.

What was your very first job? When I was 12 years old, my brother and I cut grass for a homebuilder. We borrowed \$120 from our parents to buy a lawn mower and launched into the business world. Mom and Dad were paid back in short order, and I was hopelessly hooked as an entrepreneur.

If you weren't in the restaurant facility maintenance industry, what would you be? I went to school to study aviation maintenance management. However, after just one year in the aviation/aerospace industry, I switched to the construction industry. It didn't take me long to "connect the dots" between construction and maintenance management. Soon, I found myself in the restaurant industry. In fact, I actually worked my way through school as a restaurant expediter (lead chef) with Red Lobster in Daytona Beach, Fla. I'm fortunate that I absolutely love what I do. This is my path.

What is the best advice you ever received? People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

To what would you attribute your success in achieving your CRFP? Our industry and colleagues place a high value on both RFMA and its CRFP. This designation is intended to highlight those who possess the necessary knowledge, experience and diligence. I expect there will be many more who will work to obtain the CRFP. Would you recommend attaining a CRFP to other colleagues? Absolutely.

What has been the most significant change in the restaurant industry, and how has it affected your job? The most significant change our industry has been the results of the global economic cycle. A number of our clients are deferring a portion of their facility projects. A few years ago, those projects would have been priorities. Restaurants are razor-focused on achieving return on investment, forcing us to do more and better with less.

What do you do for fun in your spare time? My wife and I have four grown children and one granddaughter. We love spending time with them. My granddaughter seems to share my passion for building. I thought my work experiences helped me achieve a great level of patience, but I found an entirely new level when an inquisitive little girl wants to work with her grandfather. When I'm not "helping" my granddaughter remodel a room in the house, my wife and I love to travel. We have a small airplane and frequently enjoy local and overnight trips.

What's the one thing most people would be surprised to learn about you? I briefly worked at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida with the quality assurance team on Thiokol Rockets. I was involved with the inspection and assembly of space shuttle components. I held a top-secret clearance and was involved in some pretty cool stuff.

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