



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Combat veteran Chris Hughes purchased Eau Gallie Electric in 2005, when it had just a couple of employees. He has grown the venture significantly, adding new divisions and building a team of professionals. The Melbourne firm serves both the residential and commercial markets, and does government work too, including for the Federal Aviation Administration. His company employs many military veterans. From left, the team includes: Jose Liranzo, Mike Linder, Dave Lawson, Corey Derfuss, Hughes, Scott Sallade, Andrew Guajardo, Adam Luckner, and Loretta Sherman. They are at the corporate office on North Drive.

West Point graduate Hughes builds Eau Gallie Electric into a thriving enterprise, team concept; leverages SkillBridge program; launches Navigation Aids division

By Ken Datzman

When Chris Hughes purchased Eau Gallie Electric Inc. nearly 17 years ago from owner Robert Pritchard, it had only a couple of electricians.

But Hughes saw an opportunity to grow the venture and became an entrepreneur for the first time. And through his years of business ownership, he has steered Eau Gallie Electric to a 30 percent compounded growth rate.

Hughes built a team that has carried the company to new heights in the market.

"This company is very family oriented," said Corey Derfuss, the construction division manager who has worked for Eau Gallie Electric for 12 years. "Chris cares about the employees and the employees' families. As we have grown, he has never lost sight of that core value."

Derfuss is a graduate of Eau Gallie High School and of the University of Connecticut, where he was an offensive lineman on the football team. He was recruited by Skip Holtz and played for the Huskies from 1996 to 2000.

Originally, Hughes said he was only interested in purchasing Eau Gallie Electric's commercial building on Aurora Road in Melbourne when Pritchard offered the business for sale as well.

This was during a time when people were "flipping" residential and commercial properties, looking to make a fast profit as real estate prices surged. Hughes said his father-in-law did some real-estate flipping back then.

"The first commercial property we came across in the

area was on Aurora Road. It housed Eau Gallie Electric. We talked to Mr. Pritchard, who had owned the business for some 50 years. He wanted to sell the building and would include the business at no premium. He financed it all and licensed us for the first couple of years. I thought it was a business we could build up."

And that's what Hughes and his team did. They built the company into a full-service electrical contracting enterprise. To accommodate its growth, Eau Gallie Electric is now located on North Drive in Melbourne where it has its offices and a large warehouse.

The Eau Gallie Electric team includes Chris Hughes' wife, Keturah Hughes. She practiced as a certified public accountant in Virginia and did auditing for blue-chip companies.

"My wife is five times smarter than I am," said Chris Hughes. "She works mostly behind the scenes at Eau Gallie Electric."

A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., Hughes served in the 82nd Airborne Division as a commissioned officer in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004. He's a decorated combat veteran.

Hughes transitioned the skills he learned at West Point and while serving abroad, to the business world. He created a company with multiple divisions, catering to both residential and commercial markets, as well as doing government projects for NASA, the U.S. Air Force, and Department of Veterans Affairs.

Last year, Eau Gallie Electric expanded its portfolio of services to include an Airport Navigation Aids division. The firm has expertise as a specialty contractor installing

lighting for radar, towers, runways and taxiways, signage, and other critical systems for the Federal Aviation Administration. The government is making upgrades.

"We see a lot of potential growth coming out of that division," said Hughes, whose company did one of the government's first tower conversions at an airport in Delaware. Satellite and Global Positioning Systems, or GPS, are the future, he said.

The way pilots and aircraft navigate from point "A to point B" is rapidly changing. Technological advances in GPS and user-interface devices are building on each development exponentially to provide pilots with up-to-the-minute information on not only the location of their aircraft, but also the aircraft around them.

Hughes recently met with about 15 FAA officials in Washington, D.C., to talk about his company's Navigational Aids capabilities. He explained to them the work his company did in Delaware.

The officials told Hughes they have hundreds of Navigational upgrade projects at airports that will need to be addressed in the future. "Are you interested?"

With its various divisions, Eau Gallie Electric looks well-positioned for the future. The company has 55 employees and is growing.

Adam Luckner said, "Chris put in a management structure for the firm that created opportunity for people to thrive." Luckner heads up Eau Gallie Electric's generator installation division. He has been a licensed electrician for more than a decade and with the company for five years.

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“Chris had faith in me and allowed me to create a generator installation division. For the last three years, we have been selling and installing generators. It has been a good business for us. Last year, for example, I was in about 1,200 homes providing information to homeowners and working with them.”

Eau Gallie Electric is an authorized dealer for the Generac brand. “Right after the 2004 hurricanes, we had a lot of people calling and asking if we sold and installed generators,” said Hughes, who earned his bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering from the U.S. Military Academy and also holds the Professional Engineer designation.

“At that time, we didn’t sell generators. I went to Home Depot and bought my first generator. I installed it at my home. I said this is something we can do and make money.”

A couple of years ago, Eau Gallie Electric was among the top 10 Generac dealers in the nation and was recognized at that company’s awards dinner in Las Vegas.

“We were at a table and the dealers from around the nation were talking about their Generac territories,” said Hughes, president of Eau Gallie Electric.

“One said he covered all of Texas, while another said he was the dealer for all of North Carolina and South Carolina. When they asked me, I said we work in one county in Florida — Brevard — and that’s it. I think that shows the density of the generator market here. It’s a big business.”

Eau Gallie Electric has made a large investment in Generac inventory. There is no wait time for the product or supply-chain issues to deal with.

One of the biggest challenges facing his company, as well as many other such businesses around the nation, is recruiting qualified electricians. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, electrician jobs are expected to grow by 8.4 percent now to 2029. This is more than double the 3.7 percent growth rate projected by all occupations.

The increase in demand is being driven by a sharp uptick in electric devices and building components that rely on electricity. From 2021 to 2022 alone, total electricity consumption in the U.S. is expected to grow by 1.4 percent. People are using more electricity than before, and more electricians are needed to install and maintain these electrical systems.

Not all industries are experiencing the electrician shortage in the same way. While overall demand for electricians is on the rise, some industries are growing more than others, especially construction.

The construction industry employs the most electricians at about 537,700, according to U.S. Department of Labor Statistics. That number is expected to grow by 11.3 percent over the next eight years.

“We spend between \$500 and \$800 a week on recruiting and can’t even fill the openings we have. We have openings in every division,” said Hughes, adding that his company is an industry partner that participates in the Department of Defense’s SkillBridge program.

According to the Department of Defense SkillBridge website, more than 500 companies around the nation are approved to participate in the program.

While service members work with civilian companies and organizations, they continue to receive their full military pay along with all their benefits.

“We are getting super high-quality employees from that program,” said Hughes. “The government pays for their first six months on the job. It’s like a tryout period. The Department of Defense sends us the people. It’s an outstanding program.”

The SkillBridge program provides service members

with opportunities to gain civilian work experience through industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last six months of their service.

Service members can apply for the program up to a year before their date of separation. Those who are approved by their commanders for program participation, are granted up to six months of permissive temporary duty to focus on training full time with approved industry partners. It often leads to many SkillBridge participants being hired in full-time positions.

An example is U.S. Air Force veteran Robert Moss, who is now an electrician with Eau Gallie Electric.

Moss spent 22 years in the Air Force. He was an aircraft electrical environmental specialist working on airplanes’ air conditioning and heating systems. North Dakota was his last duty station.

“As I was looking toward retirement from the military, I had heard about the SkillBridge program,” he said. “I knew I wanted to move to Florida and I knew I wanted to become an electrician. It’s a nice skill to have, and you are able to help people with your knowledge of that field. I emailed a bunch of different companies in this area, and Mr. Chris Hughes at Eau Gallie Electric responded to me.”

Moss added, “It’s an opportunity not only for the service member but also for the company. The employer is getting up to six months of free labor. The benefit of having a service member is that veterans are well-trained and they have a lot of life experiences. SkillBridge was a great experience for me.”

Each year, more than 200,000 service members transition out of the military. Eau Gallie Electric is a veteran-friendly employer.

“We want people who are willing to work, committed to their jobs, and will represent the company in a professional

manner. We try to hire as many veterans as we can,” said Hughes.

Hughes had academic or ROTC scholarship offers from a number of schools, including the U.S. Air Force Academy, Virginia Military Institute, and Virginia Tech. He’s from Virginia. Hughes said he visited those schools. “With the exception of the Air Force Academy, the representatives from the other schools suggested that if I had already been accepted at West Point, that’s where I should go. At the time, I really didn’t know the differences among those different institutions.”

Hughes quickly learned what separates West Point, which is one of the world’s finest leadership laboratories. West Point has been producing leaders for more than 200 years. First-year Cadets are challenged to learn and grow.

“You spend your whole first year — your ‘plebe’ year — learning to be a ‘follower.’ You suffer at the expense of others. You just have to endure. And that is what a lot of ‘being in business’ is about,” he said.

Cadet responsibility comes with the years. Hughes said he was in charge of 20 to 30 people his junior year. “In my fourth year, I had 500 people under me. You learn about delegation, you learn about how to run a staff, you learn about procedures. Everything has to be clearly spelled out, because with 500 people it’s likely that 10 percent will misunderstand instructions.”

Hughes said he believes his company will continue its long-running growth trend in 2022.

“We’re actively bidding jobs. Recently, I bid a \$10 million job. Winning a contract of that size, would be a big boost to our revenue. As we work to recruit more electricians and bring people aboard, I think we are poised to grow next year. We have wide capabilities to help our customers in the different segments we serve.”

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