

# Buchanans – a small family business looking to the next generation

Buchanan Mobile Cranes is one of two family crane businesses that are well established on the Mornington Peninsula - the other being Patterson Crane Hire. Together, these businesses have served the Peninsula well, with each having its own client base but working together when the work requires this, writes **Greg Keane**.

**G**reg Buchanan, founder of Buchanan Mobile Cranes, has a boilermaking background and the cranes were initially something that evolved out of the need to install or erect the steelwork that he fabricated. While the crane work is now a significant business in its own right, steel fabrication and engineering complement the crane business and there are many niche projects that require both areas of expertise.

Greg's son James developed an early interest in cranes, from around the age of eight as he recalls. With the business and family home co-located on acreage at Moorooduc, it was easy for James to help out after school and on weekends. It was a great learning environment: nothing was forced but neither was anything sugar-coated. As James says: "Every day was a school day."

## A son's perspective

James' learning covered both sides of the business and, when he left school, he took on an apprenticeship to become a fitter and turner with Jack Thompson Engineering in Hastings (VIC). After spending four years in the mining industry in WA as a FIFO worker, James decided that it was time to return home. Greg and Melanie happily embraced this decision.

An opportunity arose to drive a 25t Franna, and James commenced a new round of learning. He has gained a lot from stepping

James felt that they tended to keep "the little one-percenters" – the tricks for coping with really difficult situations – to themselves. He found that observation was the best way to learn these tricks.

This doesn't mean that James blindly copies the example of those that he observes: a talk to him will quickly tell you that he is his own man and will combine the best of what he sees that makes sense to him with his own ideas.

One of his observations – typical of a small family business – is that you won't always have a crane that is an ideal fit for a job, so you have to work out the best fit and approach the job differently.

Another observation is that you need to be thinking four or five steps ahead when you undertake a job: jobs are rarely simple, so

wrong position when only part way through a lift sequence.

Remaining open and flexible to meet clients' needs and expectations is critical – anything from installing sculptures at local winery venues to moving specialised precision engineering equipment to turning over a complete craftsman-made boat inside a small factory.

Greg says: "Our clients need to have confidence that their lifts are treated with respect and the utmost care. James is a lateral thinker; and this helps in planning lifts that may involve some serious challenges; and leads to some creative problem solving."

He is confident but respectful in talking to customers, and an ambassador for the business in photographing and promoting work that the business does. He and Greg travelled to the 2016



*Work on the Mornington Peninsula has provided James Buchanan and the family business with a variety of work and diversity of challenges that have helped him to build his skills, not just in crane operation, but also in planning lifts and working with customers and others on the work site.*





Some jobs are complex dual lifts and others are more routine single crane lifts, but all get the same care and attention.



For the future, he is hoping that by taking on more responsibility, this will allow his parents to step back a little and enjoy the fruits of their labour more. He has a younger brother who has followed a similar path to him in completing a trade (diesel fitter) with William Adams Caterpillar and is beginning a second trade (heavy equipment auto electrical) and working away from home. James would be pleased if his brother one day decided to return to the family business.

Reflecting on his experiences working in a family business, James concedes that "Dad

taught me 70% of what I know but the next 10% comes from experience and the next 20%, I believe, is knowledge yet to come."

### A parent's perspective

In looking back at his son's exposure to the family business, Greg said: "The boys were always out in the workshop eager to learn skills - always making and pulling apart things like pushbikes, a Villiers engine, motorbikes, go karts, 4WDs... and also doing welding and small engineering projects.

"From a young age, they always accompanied me in the crane or trucks when it was safe to do so, and they got an insight into becoming a tradesperson and also grew up with an awareness of safety around large equipment.

"After completing a trade qualification, they can specialise by following their individual interests while always having their qualifications to fall back on."

When James was older and started to show an interest in the business, Greg tried to instil in him a respect for machinery, the importance of punctuality, an ability to hold a conversation with elders and peers, and the need to listen to others' opinions and understand that there is more than one way to go about the same job.

Looking back on early crane conferences, Greg recalls them as a family occasion when their three children would company him and wife Melanie, who is an integral part of the business. He says: "The two boys were to be frequently found in the marketing booths talking to the reps and perfecting their lifting skills on the crane simulators.

"We all especially liked attending the crane displays and learning about new technology and designs and seeing new models and talking to people from all aspects in the crane industry. I think they gained an insight into the complexity of the industry as a whole from this experience: from the sales people selling lifting chains to the reps promoting crane insurance and even all the sophistication of the computer componentry."

In discussing James' announcement that he was considering a return to the family business, Greg said: "I always said to give him a go. You have to be very mindful, with the younger generation, to encourage but teach - I like to keep in mind to guide and protect. You have to work to a set of values. It has been a learning curve for me with juggling work commitments, family and lifestyle, monitoring money concerns and keeping customers happy.

"Now that James has had considerable experience at operating a variety of cranes, I value the learning opportunities he can have by attending the sessions at crane conferences and learning the regulations and statutory requirements; not to underestimate the value of networking with others in the industry on a national level."

In commenting on James' hope that his parents would be able to take a step back, Greg and Melanie said: "Achieving a perfect work/life balance is a goal but family businesses are, by nature, very intense because we are all passionate about what we do, and we are all individuals with differing strengths but striving towards a common goal.

"We hope to eventually step back from the day-to-day business duties and act in more of a mentor capacity for James as he takes on more responsibility in this vibrant and ever-evolving industry."