

## COVER STORY Finding new ways to make a living

### LEARNING FROM HISTORY Frank Mackle

# Custom builder of luxury homes now finishes what others have started



JILL KAHN

Frank Mackle, the head of a family residential construction business that goes back 102 years, knows the industry has its ups and downs, but even he was stunned by the quickness and severity of this downturn.

"Everything kind of unraveled in the fall of 2008," said Mackle, president of Mackle Construction Co. in South Miami. "About \$8 million worth of work disappeared on me. It was very shocking, to say the least."

His core custom-home business, which built hundreds of luxury residences in Key Biscayne, Coral Gables, Pinecrest and Miami Beach, had stalled. But he had history to guide him when work stopped coming in.

"We did what my predecessors have done in the past: We rolled with the punches," Mackle said, sitting behind his desk in a two-story office building in South Miami.

During World War II, the family sought out Navy contracts when homebuilding vanished, and Mackle, a 44-year-old father of three, realized he, too, needed to shift focus to survive.

Mackle, who runs the boutique construction firm with his wife, Lisa, and brother, Tom, partnered with commercial developer Venny Torre. They sought out unfinished condo projects that were taken back by lenders.

In March of 2009, Mackle and Torre, who had formed the Torre Mackle Group in Coral Gables, landed their first job. A court-appointed receiver chose them to finish building Terzetto Villas condominium in Aventura on behalf of Ocean Bank. The project was 60 percent built.

"That was a real good starting point for our commercial special asset division," Mackle said. "It was a multimillion project and a very good shot in the arm for Mackle Construction."

The partners finished Terzetto last month, and Ocean Bank has hired them to complete a distressed residential project in South Miami-Dade, he said. The

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new assignment consists of 13 single-family homes in a partially developed community called Peninsula Eureka.

"That's how we battle the storm," he said. "It's complicated work. You have to be more of a negotiator than a general contractor. You have to wear the developer's hat. You have to be a work-out specialist and deal with the subcontractors who were on board with the prior contractor to maintain some continuity in roof warranties and so forth."

The Torre Mackle Group also goes after contracts to remediate the damage caused by tainted Chinese drywall in homes. The company so far has worked on five properties, plus a townhouse Mackle owns and used as a training ground. "I learned it the hard way," he said.

His core business is showing signs of life. Since February, Mackle has signed three contracts to build luxury homes.

"The real estate brokers that I used to work with are once again showing tear-down homes," he said, referring to properties where the land is worth more than the home soon to be replaced. "They are again calling me with clients who just acquired properties and want to meet with a general contractor to [design] their new home."