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One early teacher thought Earl 'Doc' Smith wouldn't amount to much. But Doc had other ideas.

'Doc' Smith overcomes the odds with his EDS consulting business

BY BRIAN JOHNSON

F&C CONSTRUCTION WRITER

Earl "Doc" Smith knows what it's like to swim against the current. Smith is the owner of EDS Consultants and Construction Managers, a Lakeland-based small business that provides consulting, construction management, engineering, contracting and other services for a variety of project types.

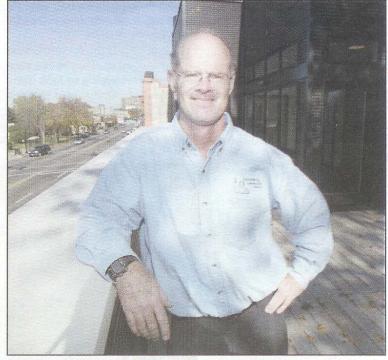
His four-person company has completed some impressive projects over the past eight years, ranging from snazzy renovations of classic buildings in Uptown to a new public safety facility in New Brighton.

An engineer by trade, Smith built the blossoming construction business from the ground up, often competing with much larger firms. Several of his projects — including a renovation of the 100-plus-year-old St. Anthony Park Branch Library in St. Paul — have won awards for construction excellence.

Not bad for someone who wasn't even considered college material.

Smith, who has dyslexia, jokes that he would have been "a lousy English teacher." He struggled through school, but never gave up. In 1980, after completing his studies at Purdue University with a degree in civil engineering, he got an unusual graduation gift from his father.

"My dad gave me a little note from my second grade teacher, who told him that he'd better find me a trade school, because I'm not smart enough to get through college," said Smith, who has done projects ranging from \$15,000 to \$15 million. "I can't spell very well," he added, "but I'm able to look at drawings and plans and be



Earl "Doc" Smith's four-person company, EDS Consultants and Construction Managers, often competes with much larger contractors. Founded eight years ago, EDS has a number of award-winning projects in its portfolio, including a renovation of the St. Anthony Park Library in St. Paul. The firm recently completed a successful renovation of Rhymesayers Entertainment's headquarters in Uptown. (F&C photo by Bill Klotz)

able to visualize what it's going to look like. ... I enjoy building."

Building — and education — runs in his family. Smith was named after his grandfather, who earned a doctorate in education and was a college professor in Michigan, and he followed in the footsteps of his father, who worked in the highway-heavy construction business.

"As a kid, I used to tag along," said Smith, who now has four sons of his own.

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'Doc' Smith: 'My clients ... I guess I look at them as family.'

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Smith's own 30-year building career includes stints with large contractors as an engineer, construction manager and superintendent. One of his projects was the Honeywell headquarters building. Honeywell was impressed enough to offer him an engineering job.

After working for Honeywell for three years, he returned to the building business.

Eight years ago, he started his own firm after his employer did what Smith calls a "bait and switch."

The company got a contract with a Wisconsin school district largely because of Smith's past work with the district, he said. But shortly after the work started, Smith was put on a larger project with a different client.

It was the final straw for Smith, who had established a good relationship with the school district on two previous projects.

"That's why I started my business — because of relationships," he said. "My clients ... I guess I look at them as family."

Notable projects

One of Smith's current clients is Skye Rossi, owner of Rhymesayers Entertainment, a Minneapolis-based hiphop record company.

They seem like an odd pair — Rossi, a hip young entrepreneur with a passion for urban music and Smith, a soft-spoken engineer with a passion for blueprints. But by all accounts, they worked well together on Rhymesayer's recently completed headquarters renovation.

"It was nice working with Doc, because he was able to sort of find ways to make changes without having a huge cost overrun," Rossi said. "Because we really didn't know what we wanted. We're really new to this, and naïve in the sense of commercial construction."

Rossi's company, headquartered in a 1920s brick structure at 2409 Hennepin Ave. S., called on Smith for advice on how to expand and upgrade the facility to meet the needs of a growing business.

"We were just cramped" in the old space, Rossi said. "Four computers on top of each other, stuff like that."

Besides being too small to house Rhymesayers' office and retail store, the building was experiencing water problems in the basement (an important storage area for the business) and lack of natural light, among other problems.

Smith, working with architect Philip Broussard of Architron and a team of subcontractors, came up with expansion options for the building and guided Rossi through the construction process.

Eventually, the construction team added a second story for office space, installed additional street-level windows to bring more natural light into the store, and brought the rear parking lot up to grade (with 100 tons of recycled class five aggregate) to address the water problems, among other upgrades.

The \$600,000 project began last October — just in the nick of time.

Smith said he pushed the start of construction because he wanted to get the new second floor enclosed before the snow began to fall.

"We put up the sides and the roof before we took the old one off," he said. "We kind of fast-tracked that."

Rossi said the timing was fortuitous.

"Pretty much the day after they put the roof on, it snowed," he said. "It was pretty dramatic."

Library renovation

The St. Anthony Park Branch Library project also had its share of drama.

Smith said all the wood in the building was "going to start turning black" from water damage, because a previous contractor didn't properly seal the roof during the renovation. To make matters worse, he said, a contractor took shortcuts on masonry work, a circular staircase was misaligned and the project was over-budget.

"They were within days of ruining the whole building," Smith said. "Water was pouring into the new part of the building and the old part of the building. I brought in a contractor to cover up the roof, and dry it out."

In the end, Smith was credited with fixing the construction problems and bringing the budget back to earth. The rehab, completed in 2000, was a success.

Smith won a number of honors for the project, including the Construction Management Association of America's 2001 Project Achievement Award, and AIA's 2000 Heritage Preservation Award of Recognition.

Smith's other award-winning projects, including pre-EDS work, include the Family Service Center in New Brighton (1996 Minnesota/Wisconsin Construction Management Project of the Year), the Glenwood City High School Remodel in Glenwood City, Wis. (1998 MN/WI CM Project of the Year) and a liquor store project in Savage (1999 MN/WI CM Project of the Year).

In 2004, the National Republican Congressional Committee recognized Smith for his "unyielding support of the Republican Party, outstanding leadership in business and commitment to President Ronald Reagan's vision for an entrepreneurial America."

In his projects, Smith sees himself as more than a construction manager or engineer.

"I look at myself as what the old-time architect/engineer used to do before we segmented everything," he said. "When they built the Sistine Chapel, the architect drew the drawings, was on the site the whole time. He lived there for the duration of the project.

"We got away from that in about the 1920s. Because of lawsuits and things, architects and engineers isolate themselves. If you have less responsibility, you have less risk."

Smith said that's not how he prefers to do business.

"Buildings and people mean a lot to me," he said. "The buck stops with me, and I will do everything I can to get the project completed."