

# THE Who's Who

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IN BUILDING & CONSTRUCTION

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## GOOD VIBRATIONS

*Vanguard Construction Solutions*  
helps clients meet tough regulations

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# GOOD VIBRATIONS

## *Vanguard Construction Solutions* helps clients meet tough regulations

by Tonie Auer

**A**s soon as Donna Pepe visited her first blast site in her early 20s, she knew that she wanted a career in the construction industry. She started learning the ropes with a geophysicist in Connecticut and never looked back. Today, she's the President and owner of *Vanguard Construction Solutions*.

The vibration-monitoring consulting company, which started as a one-person operation from Donna's home has seen a lot of accomplishments. Now, the New Milford, Conn.-based firm, which has additional locations in Stafford Springs, Conn., and Jersey City, N.J., has grown to 15 employees. What's more, the business has experienced 50 percent annual growth year-over-year for the past three



Vanguard Construction Solutions President and owner, Donna Pepe (center), with office and field staff. The firm currently has offices in Jersey City, N.J., Stafford Springs, Conn., and New Milford, Conn., with plans to add more offices across the country in the next few years.

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years. It's also certified as a women business enterprise (WBE) with The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, and a certified minority and women-owned business enterprise (MWBE) with the state of New York.

Vanguard provides a variety of monitoring services to assist construction companies in complying with local, city and state regulations. Among the services are: crack monitoring, vibration monitoring, pre-construction surveys, New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority tunnel inspection and tunnel monitoring, horizontal and vertical control surveys, environmental noise monitoring, dust monitoring and seismograph sales.

## THANKS FOR THE MENTORING

Donna says her first boss in Danielson, Conn., was a great mentor and taught her so much that Donna gave business ownership a try. When it didn't work out as she hoped, she realized she needed even more experience and knowledge and moved to New York City to work with a group of engineers on Long Island.

"It was a totally different world there with stricter rules, more regulations, more inspections, and new technology like remote monitoring. So, I started watching the owner and his project managers closely and taking cues on what I would like to incorporate, or not, into my own management style," she says.

After 10 years in New York, working for a few different companies and observing how they conducted business and treated customers, Donna felt she was prepared to open up



Vanguard Construction Solutions documents existing conditions of adjacent historical buildings using high-resolution photographs/video, and offers signed-and-sealed reports from a New York State-licensed engineer.

her own shop and effect the changes she thought the industry needed in regard to how business should be done.

"I started out with a good reputation and word got around that I had opened up my own firm," she recalls. "Several clients gave me multiple jobs and I started providing pre-construction surveys and doing crack gauges myself. It was a learning curve the first year and, once I reached a point where I wanted to add more services, I called on Randy Wheeler from White Industrial Seismology, Inc. and he sent me 10 seismographs to get started."

## ADDING HUMAN ASSETS

As the company grew, field staff and an office manager were added. "The field technicians are so important to the business," Donna says. "I can get proposals signed, but it's my people

who are face-to-face with my clients. They need to be reliable, knowledgeable, experienced and have common sense. I wanted people who cared about what they did, with a strong work ethic. That was a struggle, but now I have a great team in place."

Her field techs work closely with project managers to help clients organize their pre-construction surveys. Vanguard does a lot of work on high-rise buildings, particularly hotels. Every project is different, she says. For the smooth ones with no issues, Vanguard may exit the project at the time of topping off.

Donna says a lot of developers will use Vanguard when they have a job site in a historical district or near a historical building. In New York, there is a regulation—TPNN 1088—that requires builders to protect these buildings.

"Because we understand this law, we



can help builders and developers navigate the process,” she says. “We ask a lot of questions from the start, such as: ‘Are you underpinning? Pile driving? What are the soil conditions?’ All of these questions are important from the beginning because I can offer them the right solutions to keep them in compliance with the local law.”

Devising a monitoring plan helps developers know what services are needed. To help with that, Donna calls on Laurence Harbor, N.J.-based Pillori Associates’ geotechnical engineer Greg Pillori, who examines the foundation drawings and the survey. With his assistance, a monitoring plan is created.

On a high-rise project, Vanguard’s field team will help the construction team with the pre-construction survey, install seismographs and crack gauges. “We try very hard to be efficient. We supply a three-man team and try not to inconvenience adjacent building owners. Our goal is to do everything in one day,” Donna says.

Each project is different and can present its own challenges. Donna says remote jobs may require a parameter monitoring system, so the field techs will set up solar panels to provide power. It’s a challenge, she adds.

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Donna Pepe, Owner and President,  
Vanguard Construction Solutions

Executive Project Manager Alex Pepe is a hands-on leader. Here, he’s at one of the firm’s project locations checking the parameter vibration monitoring system.

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## TECHNOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS = NEW SERVICES

As the company won more projects, Donna invested profits back into the business and began improving technology to automate certain services. "I understand the importance of real-time readings for our clients, so technology is crucial," she says.

The addition of tilt meters allows the firm to do more than provide just construction services. With the new equipment and service line, Donna plans to open more offices in other states to expand into other industries beyond construction.

"I would like to start working on pipelines, dams and bridges," Donna says. As her team gets more training to go along with the technology, she plans to partner with other experts to

get this service line rolled out in the next three years.

## FAMILY BUSINESS EVOLUTION

Donna feels confident that she is ready to add the new service line because she has a strong team filled with people who love their jobs. Vanguard provides benefits such as a 401K and will add health insurance next year. "Employees are given incentives to sell and the tools to make sure they can do their jobs safely and correctly. They're also provided with training from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) as well as Metropolitan Transportation Authority track safety certification classes," she says.

Vanguard has evolved into a family-operated company, she says. "I've moved my sister and brother-in-law,

Patricia Richerson and Al Richerson from Florida to support me in the office and to improve our technology for our clients. Al handles quality control for the technology and has a strong tech background. He's really added a great deal of value," she says. "My sister keeps my life straight, arranges conference calls, communicates with office staff and takes on the little details so I can concentrate on growing the business."

Donna adds, "The moment they moved here is the moment things fell into place. I was given the time needed to make the changes for a strong future."

Her Executive Project Manager and main right-hand man is her nephew, Alex Pepe. "He'll run my company one day. He is out in the field with his amazing personality and a true



Al Richerson and Alex Pepe work together to provide solutions for projects. Each project is unique and may require a creative overall strategy to overcome difficult equipment installations.

concern for our customers. He is very hard working and oversees the scheduling and communication with technicians and clients. Additionally, he also sets up the equipment and maintains it out in the field,” Donna says.

Her brother, Bob Pepe, manages the jobs in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and operates out of Stafford Springs, Conn.

“There have been a lot more rewards than challenges in having a family business,” she says. “People warned me against working with family, but I have to say emphatically that I have a great family that supports me, encourages me and is looking out for me. There are six siblings in the family and to have two of them working with me has really been amazing. They make it fun; we laugh a lot more than we disagree.”

## **BUFFERS & BOUNDARIES**

When it comes to managing staff, Donna’s style is to have a buffer between herself and the employees. “My nephew is the buffer and he’s very good at it. He’ll be there for them and root for them; but he will discipline them if necessary,” she says. “I need that buffer between me and the staff, so I can concentrate on building the business.”

She says employee retention improved after Alex joined the team. “I believe in keeping them happy and giving them everything they need to do their jobs,” she says. She even bought one employee an ice tent because he was working in the late fall along the ocean performing sound monitoring.



Vanguard Construction Solutions Executive Project Manager, Alex Pepe, and President and owner, Donna Pepe. One of the firm’s services is to provide NYC Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) subway tunnel monitoring when construction is within the influence zone of an MTA structure or tunnel.

“I’ve been approached to do things I don’t agree with, and even if it is a big project and we stand to lose a lot of money, I will stand strong with my integrity.”

Donna Pepe

Alex listens to the staff and serves as a liaison to Donna, bringing problems to her attention so they can brainstorm a solution together. This improves relationships with clients, too, because it allows Donna to pay more attention to their needs.

Client relationships are important to Vanguard—but not if the staff is asked to participate in unethical business practices. “I’ve been approached to do things I don’t agree with and even if it is a big project and we stand to lose a lot of money, I will stand strong with my integrity,” Donna explains. While Donna is there for her clients on nights and weekends, she makes sure they know that her team needs 24-hour notice for any inspections. “I’m not going to be inconsiderate of [my staff’s] time,” she adds determinedly.

Clearly, Vanguard’s clients appreciate that veracity because the company has a full pipeline of projects slated for the winter, which pleases Donna immensely. “I have an obligation to my family and the field techs; they depend on me to keep this business going even through the slow times. They have to pay their bills and I’m very aware of that. Seeing their success and happiness is part of the reward for a job well done.” 🐾

*Tonie Auer is an award-winning North Texas-based freelance writer and long-time journalist.*