

PM
PLUMBING & MECHANICAL

2024

**MECHANICAL
CONTRACTOR
OF THE YEAR**

JH K KELLY



FOURTH-GENERATION FAMILY-OWNED FIRM PRIORITIZES CULTURE AND EMPLOYEE SAFETY.

BY NICOLE KRAWCKE

Longview, Washington-based JH Kelly is a large mechanical contracting firm with humble beginnings. The family-owned business celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2023. With five locations, JH Kelly provides industrial construction, commercial plumbing, HVAC and electrical and 24/7 mechanical services.

JH Kelly's commitment to maintaining its family culture through decades of growth and expansion, as well as its dedication to employee safety, has earned the company the honors as Plumbing & Mechanical's 2024 Mechanical Contractor of the Year.

RICH IN HISTORY

Jack Kelly, Sr. was a plumber in Glasgow, Scotland, before emigrating to the United States and eventually landing in Longview, Washington, to start his company - the same year the town was founded in 1923.

The contracting firm happens to be the only surviving business from that era.

JH Kelly is also unique in being a fourth-generation family-owned business. In 1945, Jack Kelly, Sr. handed the business over to his son, **Jack Kelly, Jr.**, who expanded the company from residential to light commercial. After his retirement in 1974, the business then passed to Jack Kelly, Jr.'s son-in-law **Dan Evans**, who continued to grow the contracting firm in the industrial market. Today, the company is led by his son, **Mason Evans**, president and CEO of JH Kelly, representing the fourth generation.



JH Kelly sheet metal workers and a plumber work onsite at the Washington State Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Youth, an expansion project to an existing campus constructed to new deafspace standards.

“During my dad’s tenure, he really grew the business,” Evans says. “We went from being the second largest plumber in a small mill town to really being a larger industrial company and started working at paper mills, refineries, power plants and ports in the 1980s and 1990s. He was just a super great guy to follow in business and a real cheerleader. He was a father figure to 200 people, and so I followed in his footsteps. He passed away in 2022.”

Evans started with the family business right out of college in 1994 and worked his way through various roles before taking the helm in 2002.

“We’ve got four different operating groups,” he explains. “We’re a trade contractor with a commercial mechanical group and an electrical team. You can find us hanging out under tower cranes and we have 24/7 service and SPG teams supporting our customers. We’ve also got an industrial group and a structures team that puts up pre-engineered metal buildings. On the industrial side, we’re a self-performing, multi trade general contractor that works prime to owners. We place concrete, erect steel, set equipment, install process piping and electrical systems. Having all these skill sets under one roof makes us a little different.”

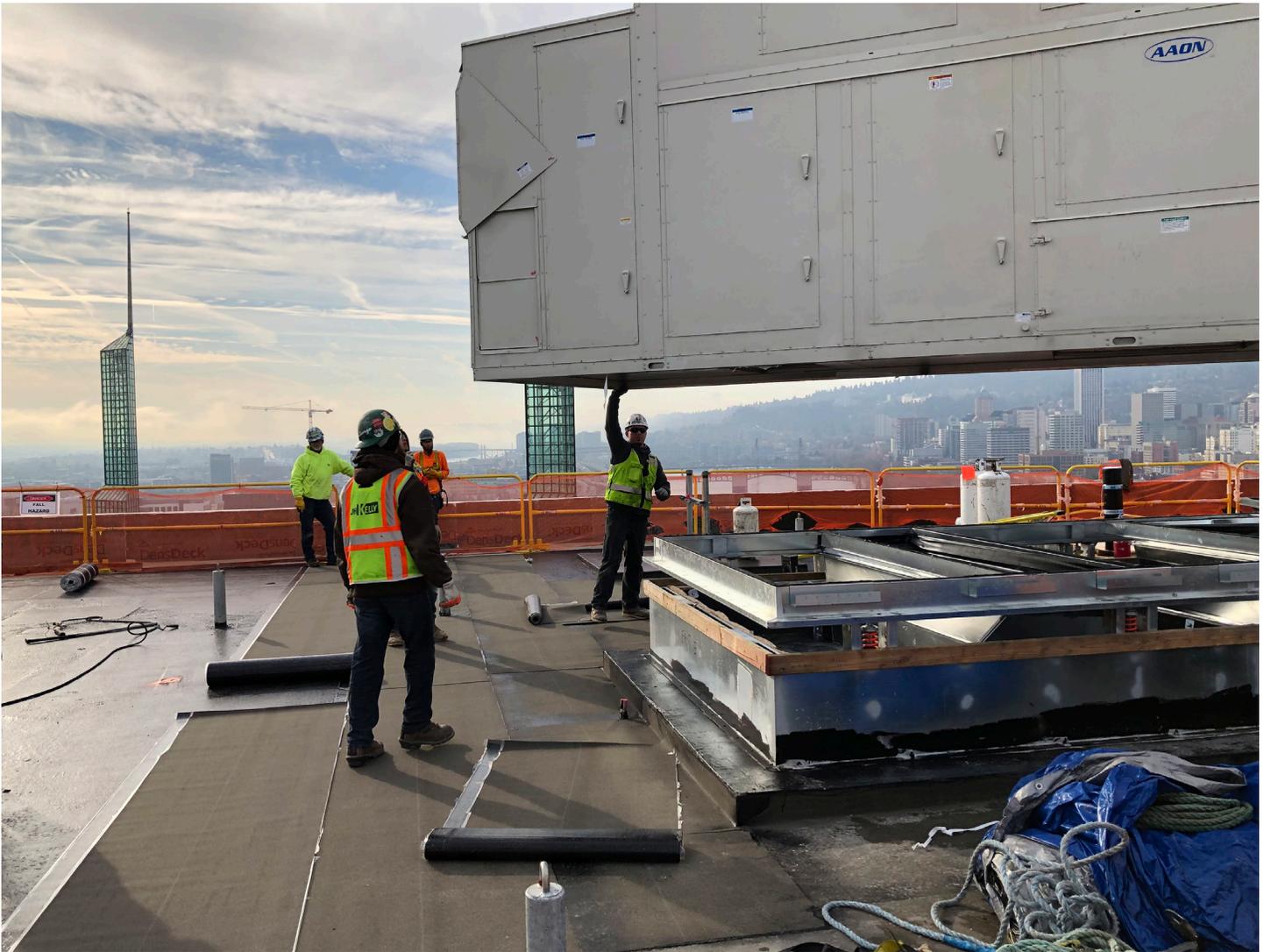
Though JH Kelly plays in many different markets, Evans notes that it has really worked on building out its mechanical services, SPG groups and sheet metal capability. The firm boasts 1,500 employees, five offices and 500,000 square feet of fabrication and module space. In addition to Longview, offices are located in Seattle, Bellingham, and Vancouver, Washington, and Milwaukie, Oregon. JH Kelly’s service area includes Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and select jobs in Arizona for strategic customers.

JH Kelly is a proud member of the ACE Peer Group, six large mechanical contractors that get together for benchmarking at company critiques and host focus groups to pursue operational excellence, Evans adds.

“We are not trying to just chase big new construction projects, but instead be there for our customers for all of their projects - from mission-critical to refinery work to service calls to elementary schools, and really everything in between,” he says. “I take a deep pride in building things and taking care of our customers. Winning new projects is fun. But so is figuring out how you’re going to build them - it takes folks from all different backgrounds, men, women, young apprentices and old, grizzled superintendents. I like watching the creative process that happens to turn plans into reality.”



With five locations in the Pacific Northwest, JH Kelly provides industrial construction, commercial plumbing, HVAC and electrical and 24/7 mechanical services



The JH Kelly team installs an AHU on top of the Hyatt Regency, a new hotel tower in Portland, Oregon.

A HEALTHY CULTURE PRIORITIZING SAFETY

JH Kelly has always been strong on culture, a fact that Evans attributes to having roots in a small town. The firm's people-first approach is evident on its website where team members' personalities shine through in fun portraits displaying each individual's hobbies.

"Our core values are family and safety all day long," he says. "We still do company picnics, I do birthday cards for every foreman and staff employee in the company and we do a ton of awards and recognition. An example of this is when my dad passed away, the guys in the fab shop fabbed up his urn and his ashes are now in the taproom in Longview - it's a break room with a couple of beer taps and a shuffleboard table. Everyone hangs out there - IT guys mix with welders from the shop. It feels right because my dad was always more comfortable with our superintendents and shop kids than anyone else, and his values really permeate our company."

Steve Gragg - vice president of Seattle operations, got into a pipefitting apprenticeship with Local 695 in Longview in 1980. He went through five years of apprenticeship working for various contractors and was considering leaving the trade when he was offered the opportunity to work for JH Kelly.

"It was a different organization from the start," he says. "With JH Kelly, I noticed right off the bat, they paid attention and acknowledged hard work. They set a high bar for what was acceptable for work ethic and attitude, and I worked hard to earn the respect of my peers. I kept getting new opportunities put in front of me, on different jobs and different roles. I loved it and loved the people there right away. They were all great people that cared about each other and I could feel that."



A JH Kelly Plumber solders copper piping at the Washington State Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Youth (CDHY).



JH Kelly's Craft leadership poses in front of some freshly installed copper piping.

A few years ago, Gragg moved to Seattle to head up the new office as vice president of operations. “There is a great group of people up here, but it was a struggling branch. It was fun and challenging to come up here to see where they needed help. I love this organization. We’ve grown so much. It’s cool to see young people coming in and feeling that culture. Keeping that culture alive is hard to do when you get this big and more spread out. But we’ve managed to do that - it’s about getting those right people in the right places to help instill and share that culture to make everyone feel like part of the family.”

Gragg will be retiring from the company at the end of the year. However, he will still be active by helping out whenever needed, and he plans to stay connected through organized JH Kelly retiree events. The company has an annual party devoted to its retirees and more recently began holding quarterly breakfast meet ups for its retirees which are attended by nearly 100 people.

“Our culture is our biggest differentiator,” he adds.

As a proud union shop, JH Kelly operates with no walls between its job sites and its offices.

“You’d probably have trouble telling the craft folks from the staff folks here,” Evans explains. “We just look at them as they just had different training, whether you came through an apprenticeship or a college program. We’re one of those companies where if you’re good and you hustle, you can do some amazing stuff here.”

As Evans mentioned, safety is a core value and for JH Kelly. The firm has won several safety awards from AGC, MCAA and MCA of Western Washington.



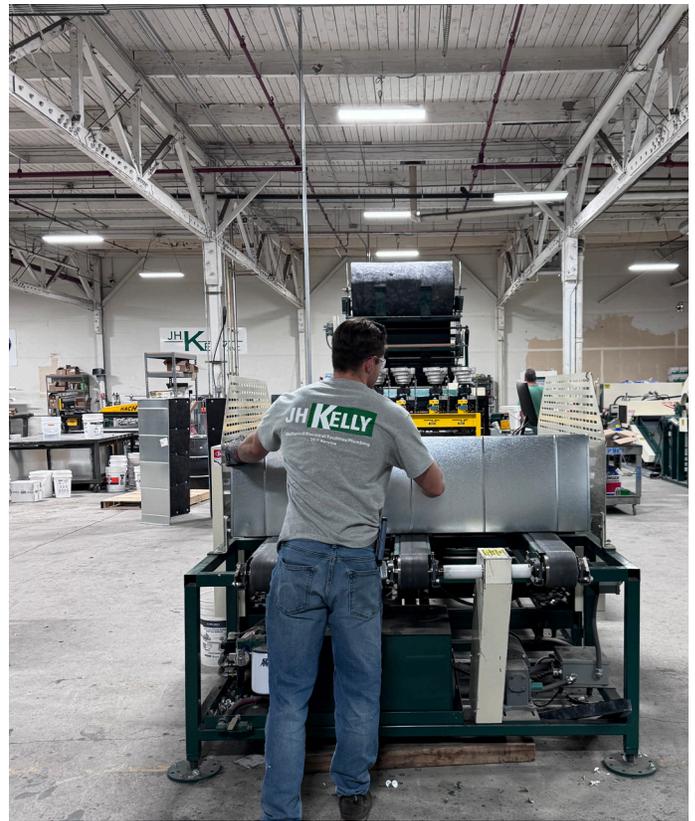
In addition to Longview, offices are located in Bellingham, Washington, Seattle, Vancouver, and Milwaukie Oregon. With a footprint in the entire Greater Pacific Northwest Jh Kelly's service area includes Washington , Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and select jobs in Arizona for strategic customers.

“Everything we do, every decision we make always comes back to safety,” explains Josh Atkinson, vice president of field labor for JH Kelly. “We are winning when our teams say ‘You are my brother or sister, I’m watching out for you,’ and when you have people who have the strength to say, ‘Hey, I saw you doing this and let’s have a talk.’”

Gragg adds that any employee - even a first day, first-year apprentice has the authority to stop work because of a safety issue. “If you get put in a position or you see something you don’t think is safe, you can stop it. I think our guys knowing that feel safer already. ‘Yes, I can prevent myself or others from being hurt. I don’t have to talk to this guy so he can talk to someone else.’ It’s immediate authority. That helps.”

Additionally, there’s no construction hierarchy amongst the different trades, Atkinson notes.

“We’re all the same,” he says. “We treat each other with respect. The laborers have just as important a job as the steamfitters do, etcetera. That’s why culture is so important. We treat all our people fairly and with respect and we don’t care if you’re male or female or what your walk of life is - any of that stuff. We don’t put up with any nonsense in regard to discrimination. Word spreads and folks know that JH Kelly is a really good company to work for where we will keep you and give you all the opportunity you want.”



JH Kelly boasts 1,500 employees and 500,000 square feet of fabrication and module space.

Atkinson, a dues-paying steamfitter out of UA Local 290 in Portland, started as an apprentice at age 19. As a journeyman, he was offered a position as a foreman with JH Kelly and has never looked back. In his role now, Atkinson represents roughly 1,200 union employees amongst the various trades and heads up the company’s Craft Council, which includes representatives from each of its self-performed trades and meets monthly.

“All of those folks ensure we’re putting the right people in the right spots,” Atkinson says. “They understand who are the up-and-comers, who are raising their hands and looking for more opportunity. Together, we work through the movement of all the manpower to cover everything we need to cover at JH Kelly. We start the meeting with safety then talk about tools, fleet, and equipment, any legal concerns, IT and more. We go around the room and everyone talks about what we are working on and where we are at. That cross-pollination of so many people in such a big company really offers a pipeline to job site solutions. It’s just a lot of support in all directions.”



Safety is also a core value and chief priority for JH Kelly. The firm was won several safety awards from AGC, MCAA, and MCA of Western Washington

“Our Craft Council leads the company’s training efforts,” Evans adds. “A lot of companies HR teams just focus on staff employees. For us, it’s both staff and craft. We do a lot of training through the MCA, SMACNA and NECA. We do in-house training - it’s called Shaw School, after one of our vice presidents who champions personnel development. We also do outside training on soft skills and a lot of Dale Carnegie leadership training in addition to mental health training because that’s a big issue for our workforce right now.”

Atkinson says his goal is to help JH Kelly fill that gap between experienced labor and people just starting out. “I’ve been in the trades for 28 years. How do we get good as construction people? It’s through a lot of experience and learning lessons the hard way. It’s like every job I’ve been on - you get your butt kicked here or there, and you learn, ‘I’m never doing that again.’ Then you go to the next job and you’re better.

How do we get our young men and women trained up as quickly as possible without letting them take those beatings for 25 years to make them good? It takes a lot of training, a lot of talking. It’s a lot of spending time in the field, listening and being there to support them. That’s my job.”



JH Kelly boasts 1,500 employees and 500,000 square feet of fabrication and module space.



JH Kelly holds an annual party devoted to its retirees, and more recently, has begun holding monthly coffee meet ups for retired employees

THE LONG GAME

JH Kelly is always competing for people, Evans notes.

“We’ve had multiple years of growth and our staffing is up 25%,” he says. “We’re selective about who we work with - we get to say no. We don’t want to grow just to grow. We want to grow to be good, and work with people we want to work with. If you take on too much, you just chew your people up, and we don’t want to do that either.”

Evans says his best recruiters are his employees.

“We keep them super informed about what positions we’re looking for and where our work is,” he says.

“Everyone supports HR with recruiting. We’re pretty rigorous with our interviews and set a high standard. You can’t just expect that people are going to love your company and love what they’re doing here, so we spend a lot of time listening to our employees, asking them how we can get better. We do 90-day check ins with all new hires as well as new foremen when they get promoted. We think we have something special here, and we don’t take it for granted.

Evans is aware that many companies are facing labor shortages and having difficulties recruiting experienced tradesmen and women. “My response is always, ‘Would you rather have it the other way and have a trained, experienced workforce with no work?’ It’s great to have a ton of work and people who are excited about getting into our industry. When we did our 100-year celebration for the company, we had a lot of fun and rolled out our 200-year crest. We want to be around for another 100 years.”

That mentality is important for the company as it maps out the next century, Evans adds. “I’ve got kids in college showing some interest in the business. We’ve got a lot of employees with family members who work here. We just try to keep people excited about work and thinking about the long term. We have an internship program, great apprenticeship programs and the deep mentoring that happens through our Craft Council. We’re always trying to drag people along to that next level within our organization. We’re an open book, so we like to share the numbers, share the experiences, give our young employees the why, and they’re fast learners. We’ve been playing the long game for a long time.”



Mason Evans, president and CEO of JH Kelly, represents fourth generation of family ownership of the 101-year-old mechanical contracting firm.

THE NEXT 100

Gragg reflects that the people and relationships have been his favorite thing about his 38 year tenure with JH Kelly. “Connecting with people, whether it be our people or customers has been the best part for me. The culture of the company started long before I was there, but I was fortunate to be able to help spread that culture as we went into different markets. That’s what makes this fun. This business is all about people, and will continue to be about people moving forward.”



JH Kelly has invested in the facilities and technology to pre-fabricate civil, structural, piping and electrical systems. In-house detailing enables its shop foreman to “virtually” layout material for pre-assembly and fabricate large runs of pipe, conduit or steel in record time and in coordination with other trades.



JH Kelly celebrated its Scottish roots during its 100th anniversary celebration in 2023.

“We’ve got a lot of great things we’re really proud of, but we’re not going to get stale,” he says. “We’re going to keep chasing it - getting better at safety, better for our customers and be that preferred employer where people are fiercely loyal and proud to work here.”

Evans says JH Kelly also tries to be the right amount of humble that comes from being in a small town. At first, he was even a little reluctant to accept the award as 2024 Mechanical Contractor of the Year. “My dad always used to say, ‘Hey, the whale that spouts gets harpooned.’ But then we just hit 100 years, and we do some really great things. It’s something we should be proud of, and we really appreciate the recognition.”

Atkinson notes that success and growth is earned. “JH Kelly has earned that through a lot of really hard work from a lot of really good people for a lot of years. This current generation was handed a pretty cool company with lots of opportunities. We honor that hard work and effort from the people before us, and we try to stick to that as we move to the next generation moving forward.”