



Owner Tammy Eagle Bull in front of the Rialto Building on 15th and O streets in Lincoln, an Encompass remodeling project ... Branching out from the firm's tribal project roots to work on projects for the Lincoln Public Schools and other local developers.

Native-owned Encompass Architects adding diverse projects to client base

by Jim Brazda

Seeing opportunity in an underserved tribal community, Tammy Eagle Bull opened Encompass Architects with her husband, Todd Hesson, in 2002. Eagle Bull said she was encouraged from the beginning when they launched with a \$20 million tribal project.

Larger architectural firms began calling as soon as they landed the project to ask if they needed help, Eagle Bull chuckled, all of

them used to American Indian-owned firms being composed of one or two people suited only for small projects.

Now, with just five years under their belts, Encompass Architects is looking to open a second office in Phoenix and is beginning to diversify its customer base, Eagle Bull said.

Working solely with tribal communities in the beginning,

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Native-owned Encompass Architects adding diverse projects to client base

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Encompass has recently undertaken projects for the Lincoln Public Schools and local developers, she said.

"We knew it would take a while for our reputation to be good enough to get local work," Eagle Bull said.

Encompass has been experiencing a steady 10 percent annual growth, she said. With half of their work in the Southwest, Encompass wanted a second location to supplement the headquarters in Lincoln.

In 2005 the architects formed a separate company in Phoenix and began to track its profits separately. The Phoenix operation marked a profit in its second year, and now Encompass is working on opening an office and adding two more staff members.

While Encompass is beginning to diversify, around 80 percent of the clients are American Indian tribes, Eagle Bull said.

The firm has a national reach, with projects going on in Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona. At any given time, Encompass is working on 15 to 20 projects of various sizes.

Part of the battle of building a company on a resume of tribal work is fighting preconceptions that tribal projects are of lesser quality, Eagle Bull said. In actuality, she said, many tribal projects are funded by the federal government, which has higher standards and codes than most municipalities.

"It is actually more complex," Eagle Bull said, "and you are dealing with a group because tribal communities make decisions as a group."

After she explains the codes and funding process Encompass works with, non-tribal customers begin to realize all the work involved, and the fact that past clients are happy goes a long way, she said.

"Just because it was tribal work doesn't mean it was less quality work," Eagle Bull said.

With the disappearance of older, larger American Indian-owned architectural firms, Eagle Bull said, she saw a demand for an

architectural firm that could work with tribal customers to provide high-quality designs for projects of all sizes.

"I felt that if you're going to do work like that, you have to be there for all the projects," Eagle Bull said.

Many firms that are not American Indian-owned and not familiar with the culture typically do not work with tribes except on big projects.

With only a basic understanding of the culture and not devoting much time to tribal projects, many architects were producing superficial designs that

did not truly reflect the clients' heritage, Eagle Bull said. For example, they would install a tiled pattern on the wall or a patterned stripe on the façade and call it Native, she said.

To more fully serve its tribal customers, Encompass developed a unique, highly communicative process when approaching a project.

"A lot of our inspiration comes from our clients," Eagle Bull said. "We brainstorm with them and incorporate their ideas into the design."

As a result, most of the cultural references in Encompass' designs are subtle, she said. They are evident in how a building is organized, using the four directions as an example. One of Eagle Bull's designs for an educational building for the Gila River Indian Community is laid out to represent the community's view on the path through life. Children progress on the path as they move to higher grade levels.

Eagle Bull said she does not even think about making a rough sketch of a concept until she has met with a client several times. To come in with an idea ready to go is presumptive, she said.

Working with a community, Eagle Bull said, it is important to establish trust and research a tribe's culture and "make sure along the whole way they know what things are going to be used where."

When she was working on a project for an Arizona tribe, Eagle Bull said, some community members approached her about misgivings about incorporating a cultural symbol in the courtyard. Eagle Bull said she went to a tribal elder with the concerns, and he agreed that it was not a good idea to incorporate that symbol in that spot because some people may be offended that people would be walking on it.

"This is your building, we're just the pencil," Eagle Bull said.

Eagle Bull, a member of the Lakota tribe, said she had known she wanted to be an architect since she was 8 years old. The desire was inherited from her father, who also wanted to be an architect but was discouraged by a guidance counselor.

Working as a teacher, Eagle Bull said, her father was always frustrated by the Pan-Indian design architectural firms came up with when proposing designs for new school buildings. Encouraged by her father and her grandfather who knew the Native community would need professionals to grow, Eagle Bull said, she was dedicated to fulfilling her dream from an early age. "I never wavered from that," Eagle Bull said.

Encompass Architects

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Founded: 2002

Service/product: architectural services

Number of employees: 9

One-year goal: open office in Phoenix