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Designer Charts New Waters With Dallas Church Aquarium

CHURCH PROJECT CAME ALIVE

BY CHERYL HALL
DALLAS MORNING NEWS

Greg Barron builds sanctuaries for the human soul.

In the last 22 years, the 51-year-old founder and chief executive of G.L. Barron Co. in Fort Worth has designed and built hundreds of churches in Texas.

But he never anticipated building a haven for creatures of the sea.

At the 36-acre campus that G.L. Barron built for Inspiring Body of Christ Church in South Dallas, up to 10,000 worshippers a week are greeted by a 75,000 gallon, 70 foot-long, 18-foot-high saltwater aquarium.

The aquarium, which has more than 80 species, is not just about wow factor. It's a living mission statement.

Pastor Rickie Rush wants his congregation of all types of "fish" — black, white, Hispanic, Asian, with diverse cultural and economic backgrounds — to create a peaceable kingdom that welcomes all.

"Even when there's no one else in the church, there's always something moving in there," says Rush, who has been told that this is the largest noncommercial aquarium in the world. "It's like God's presence. You may not see it, but it's always moving."

The church also uses the aquarium for community outreach. Anyone who registers with proper photo identification can see it for free.

School kids come in on buses, learn how the ocean operates from three aquarists on staff and take a test about what they've learned.

IBOC is the largest, most unusual and complicated project that Barron's company has tackled since getting into this specialty with a small, houselike addition to a Bible church in DeSoto in 1989.

But these days, churches are highly individualized.

"Designing a church is often like designing a custom home with five couples with different ideas who are all going to live inside that home," Barron says. "You have to bring those diverse



G.L. Barron charted new waters in building a 75,000-gallon saltwater aquarium for Inspiring Body of Christ Church in South Dallas.

ideas into a single solution. It's not easy."

CHURCHES ARE FOCUS

Churches, primarily in Dallas-Fort Worth and all in Texas, account for about 80 percent of Barron's an-

nual revenue, which will be about \$40 million in 2011. While that's down about 15 percent from its previous three years, 2012 is shaping up as a banner year for Barron, which employs 30 to 50 people, depending on how many projects are in

the works.

“Crazy enough, we’re probably as busy as we’ve ever been in the stage-and-creation phase because of the economics,” the owner says, citing low interest rates and labor costs. “And land costs are totally in the Land of Real.”

Last year, his firm completed a 1,100-seat auditorium for North Side Baptist Church in Weatherford that Barron says is “probably the finest concert venue

LEAP OF FAITH

Building the aquarium “stretched every limit of discipline that we ever thought we would use,” Barron says as a stingray floats above his head in one of two tunneled archways. “It weighs massive amounts, creates a lot of pressure and needs structural engineering — in addition to dealing with corrosive issues of saltwater.”

Rush first shared his vision with Barron four years ago.



G.L. Barron completed this 1,100-seat auditorium for North Side Baptist Church in Weatherford last year. It’s been nicknamed the Bass Hall of Weatherford because of its acoustics.

between Fort Worth and Abilene. We refer to this project as the Bass Hall of Weatherford because of the precise acoustic modeling on all the exterior surfaces.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Barron designed and built the non-denominational Parker County Cowboy Church in Aledo, a 600-seat facility with an attached horse arena and cedar hitching rails.

“Rickie wanted to be able to walk through an aquarium like you’d find in an ocean center,” Barron recalls. “I told him, ‘If you can think it and you can afford it, we can most likely provide solutions for it.’”

That was exactly what Rush wanted to hear. Other builders had told him it couldn’t be done.

“They thought I was some guy out here fantasizing over something he wanted

to build but wouldn’t be able to pay for,” recalls the leader of the nondenominational IBOC, which he founded in 1990.

Rush was so impressed with Barron’s willingness to take a leap of faith that he awarded the entire \$40 million, 176,000 square-foot worship facility to G.L. Barron. The aquarium cost about \$4 million to design, build and stock.

The aquarium was finished in November 2009 but hasn’t gotten much publicity until recently, when it was featured on Animal Planet’s new TV series Tanked. The show is about the work of its two co-hosts, Wayde King and Brett Raymer, and their Las Vegas-based Acrylic Tank Manufacturing, which installed IBOC’s

aquarium.

In the episode that aired Sept. 2, King and Raymer called the South Dallas creation, which took two cranes and 10 workers to install, “one of the most amazing, over-the-top aquariums we’ve done.”

Marine biologist Stephen Burkett, who previously worked at Discovery World at Pier Wisconsin in Milwaukee and the Downtown Aquarium in Houston, agrees that this ocean in a tank is one of a kind.

“Most public aquariums exhibit animals based on geography,” he says. “The focus here is to show how animals can come from all over the world and coexist.” Is it always a peaceable

kingdom?

“We have successes and failures,” he says.

Just like with people, Rush says.

Greg Barron

Title: President, chief executive, G.L. Barron Co. in Fort Worth

Age: 51

Born: Fort Worth

Resides: Aledo

Education: Management degree, Dallas Baptist University, 1985; finance degree, University of Texas at Arlington, 1991; owner/president management program, Harvard Business School, 2010

Company focus: Designs and builds Christian worship centers, retirement communities and medical facilities in Texas

Company history: Founded in 1988, first church work completed the following year

Personal: Married for 27 years, four children

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