

TRUSTING A NEW GENERATION OF TRADESPEOPLE

Always Tile & Stone LLC gives disadvantaged teens a second chance

by Susan Diemont-Conwell



Headquartered in Forest Lake, Minnesota, *Always Tile & Stone LLC* provides a variety of tile services for clients in the greater Twin Cities region. President Cassandra Kuuipo (left) and foreman Ty Meusburger (right) with their son and foreman Ty Meusburger Jr. (center).



When the team at *Always Tile & Stone LLC* shows up to a new project, the young faces of the crew at first might raise eyebrows. Any doubt about their talents, however, quickly dissipates when the team gets to work. The tile setters, most in their late teens and early 20s, work seamlessly together, helping each other out and taking pride in the precision of their work.

“There’s no ego with our crew,” says company owner and President Cassandra Kuuipo Washington. “They work closely together to complete projects quickly and accurately.”

Always Tile & Stone is unique in that most of its workers were once disadvantaged teens. The company has not only trained them in the trade, but the company owner has provided a home for these young men at one time or another. “We consider our employees family,” Washington says.

Always Tile & Stone has been turning heads across Minnesota since it began in 2004. The commercial tile and stone company provides a variety of tile services—including installation of porcelain floors, ceramic wall tile, glass mosaic tile and tile backsplashes—to residential and commercial clients in the greater Twin Cities region. From complex patterns to large-scale projects, the family-owned business takes pride in the artistry of its work.

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The team at Always Tile & Stone LLC are hardworking and dedicated to the project at hand.



"Tiling is an art and a skill," says foreman Ty Meusburger. "It's like making that perfect painting. With every bathroom, shower or floor, you're always trying to create that perfect effect. When you stand up after setting a floor and see the end result, it's incredibly satisfying."

BRINGING TOGETHER A FAMILY

Meusburger has been a tile setter for more than 20 years. "My father and my grandfather were both tile setters," he says. "I began learning the trade when I was 9 years old. I'd go with my father to jobs, and he'd put me to work chiseling, grouting and cleaning the truck. When I was 14 years old, I started working full time." Meusburger honed his talents on projects for schools, retail stores and malls.

At 14 years old, Meusburger first met Washington. The two have been in each other's lives ever since. They have five children together, including two children who work in the business. "Five years ago, we moved from Phoenix to Minneapolis, where I could earn more as a tile setter," Meusburger says. "Our oldest son, Ty Jr., wanted to work with me, along with my nephew, Odessa. Cassandra was working as a welder at the time, and with her first check, she bought Ty a saw and tools so he could join me in the field."

Not long after, the family decided to start a business. "Ty Jr. wondered why we couldn't bid on projects



Foreman Ty Meusburger personally trains his team, who take pride in the artistry of their work.

ourselves, instead of working as hired hands,” Washington says. “So I formed the company and began learning how to estimate and bid on projects.”

Washington heads up the management of the company, including estimating, ordering materials and meeting with clients. Once a project is secured, Meusburger takes the lead. He, his dad, Roy, and his eldest son serve as foremen. “Ty Jr. is grandpa’s little protégé,” Meusburger says. “My dad taught him how to set tile, and the two used to work side by side every day, just like I used to.”

The new company was not only an opportunity to pursue larger projects, but was important to the family unit as well. “Elijah, our 18-year-old son, is an individual with special needs. Throughout his life, it’s been hard to find caretakers, and either Ty or myself had to be home with him at all times. We always worked opposite schedules,” Washington says. “With the new company, I could be at home with Elijah and have the flexibility we needed to get him to appointments. It was an opportunity to bring the family closer together.”

PROVIDING A HOME AND A TRADE

The minority- and woman-owned business opened its doors with just a few employees. One of its first projects was a 50-square-foot tiling job for a liquor store in Edina, Minnesota. Not long after, the company secured a high-profile job at the Hennepin County Government

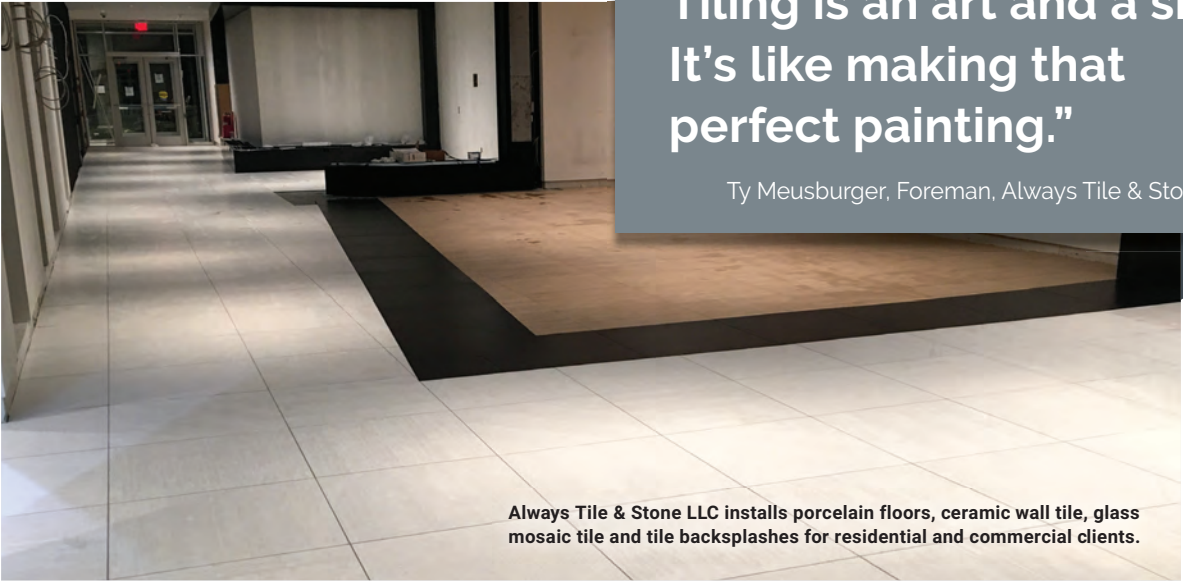
Center for general contractor Shaw-Lundquist Associates Inc. “We tiled 44 bathrooms on 22 floors. Shaw believed in us and placed huge trust in us. After the success of that project, word spread fast and our reputation quickly grew,” Meusburger says. The company has doubled its revenue nearly every year. Today, Always Tile & Stone has a team of 40 employees.

Their employees are more like family than workers, according to both Washington and Meusburger. “They were all disadvantaged teens who came to our doorstep one way or another,” Washington says.

Meusburger explains that it started when his two oldest sons brought home friends in need. “Their friends hadn’t had the best upbringing, but they wanted to work. They wanted to better themselves,” he says.

Washington and Meusburger have an average of 10 disadvantaged teens living with them at any one time. Of their 40 employees, about 90 percent have lived with them for one or more years.

“Cassandra is a boss and a mom to these guys. She cooks them dinner every night. She helped each of them open their first bank account. She deposits their paychecks, and she teaches them the importance of a credit score. She’s incredible. The guys have great respect for her,” Meusburger says.



“Tiling is an art and a skill. It’s like making that perfect painting.”

Ty Meusburger, Foreman, Always Tile & Stone LLC

Always Tile & Stone LLC installs porcelain floors, ceramic wall tile, glass mosaic tile and tile backsplashes for residential and commercial clients.

He notes that on any given night the family has up to 15 employees at dinner. “Our grocery bill is \$3,000 or \$4,000 a month, but we never charge them. We’re committed to these kids. They rely on us,” he adds.

The couple’s belief in their team has certainly made a difference in the trajectory of their lives. “These young men want to work. They are eager to learn,” Meusburger says. “Their parents lead hard lives with not a lot of time for them. So we train them. I show them basic things, like how to use a wrench, explaining how it works and what it’s used for. They appreciate that.”

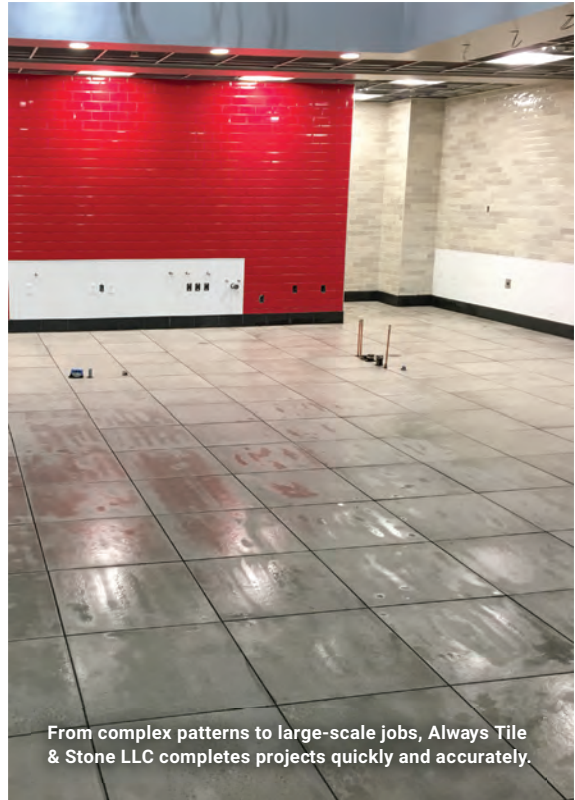
The team is hardworking, loyal and dedicated to the project at hand, states Meusburger. “I have 15 guys who have lived with us the longest. I call them my team captains. They not only help to supervise projects, but they work side by side with new employees to give them hands-on training,” he says.

“Our diligence and dedication makes Always Tile & Stone a subcontractor of choice for projects throughout the region,” Meusburger says, citing a recent project for the Opus Group in the lobby of MoZaic East in uptown Minneapolis. “We were grateful to be chosen to work on a large project like this. The fact that the Opus Group, Shaw and other general contractors believe in us and give us these types of opportunities means a great deal.”

Another impressed client is Tim Hortons, a transnational fast-food restaurant chain known for its coffee and doughnuts. “We’ve tiled several Tim Hortons in Minneapolis. Our client recognized the boys’ hard work and quality right out of the gate,” Meusburger says.

Both Meusburger and Washington agree that the heart of the company is these once-disadvantaged teens. “We believe in these young people, and we work hard to give them an opportunity to better their lives,” Washington says. “It’s amazing to watch them grow and transform themselves, and it’s great that our clients see their talent and potential as well.” 🐼

With more than 20 years in the communications industry, Susan Diemont-Conwell works with companies, nonprofits and individuals to produce stories and publications that move and inspire.



From complex patterns to large-scale jobs, Always Tile & Stone LLC completes projects quickly and accurately.



Always Tile & Stone LLC is a subcontractor of choice for commercial projects throughout Minneapolis.