

**F**OR a layman, the name Prime Structures Engineering might not ring a bell. But one would most certainly have come across some of the company's projects in Singapore and beyond. The homegrown family business has had a part to play in

creating some of Singapore's iconic architecture, including the Marina Bay Sands (MBS) SkyPark, Changi Airport Terminal 3 and Orchard Central.

Specialising in envelope structures, or the exterior façade of buildings, one of its upcoming projects here is megamall Northpoint City in Yishun, slated to open at the end of the year.

Amassing such an illustrious and sizeable portfolio is no mean feat for a local small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) which started from scratch in 1995. Currently helmed by founder and managing director Sonny Bensily, other family members involved in the business today include wife Diana, who is the financial controller, as well as eldest daughter Julia, who is associate director.

Despite the general slowdown in the construction sector, the father-daughter duo say that they are not afraid to dream big. One ambitious plan tacked on the wall in their Tagore Lane office is to grow their turnover to hit S\$250 million by 2026 from S\$67 million in 2016.

Another is a possible initial public offering. Mr Bensily tells *The SME Magazine*: "One of our aspirations is to be listed one day."

#### SEIZING OPPORTUNITY

Prime Structures may be known today for its ability to turn technically complex architectural designs into a reality, but it had much more humble beginnings.

When it started, the company was a general building contractor as well as sub-contractor doing structural steelwork for residential, commercial and industrial buildings.

Julia Bensily says: "At that time, a project size of

# CONSTRUCTING A FAMILY BUSINESS

BY VIVIEN SHIAO

Eldest daughter Julia may have taken on a leadership role in Prime Structures, but its founder and managing director Sonny Bensily says that it doesn't mean only family members can run the company.

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— Julia Bensily, associate director, Prime Structures

S\$100,000 to S\$200,000 was a big thing to us."

This transition to niche projects that requires such specialised skills and expertise did not happen overnight. As the company's capabilities grew after it took on project after project, so did its reputation.

Then came its breakthrough undertaking of MBS in 2008, where Prime Structures was given the task of cladding the belly of the MBS SkyPark – the ship-like platform on top of the three hotel towers – 57 storeys above ground level. Its successful completion paved the way for the company to not only take on bigger scale projects, but also to venture overseas.

A string of high-profile projects abroad followed, such as the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, the Ministry of Finance in Brunei, as well as the recently completed casino resort and hotel complex Okada Manila in the Philippines.

As the company expanded, it also became more comfortable in the spotlight. Last year, Prime Structures participated in the Enterprise 50 Awards, one of Singapore's most prestigious honours for privately owned local companies in Singapore. It came in 11th place, a remarkable showing for its first try.

Not content with the status quo, the firm is constantly on the lookout for new opportunities. While its core façade business has been growing in many countries such as Sri Lanka and the Philippines, the company is intending to enter into new areas such as manufacturing and low-cost housing.

Says Mr Bensily: "When we meet prospective investors, one of the common questions they like to ask is about recurring income. Construction work can be a bit 'lumpy' and they don't like that, even if the company is profitable."

To address these concerns, Prime Structures is now trying to grow its recurring income segment, starting with Sri Lanka. "Originally, our intent (when we went to Sri Lanka) was to grow what we are good at, which is façade work," says Mr Bensily. "But when we went there, people approached us as the Singapore housing model is very attractive to them."

The idea intrigued them both. In Mr Bensily's own words, putting up some buildings is "not rocket science", but about managing the supply chain.

As Sri Lanka is a developing country, its need for construction materials is still quite basic, explains Ms Bensily. With the technology acquired from a friend, the company is in the process of planting the necessary infrastructure to manufacture eco-friendly bricks made from waste material that is lighter, easier to install and requires less plaster.

Prime Structures hopes to secure projects with the materials that it manufactures by end of 2017. According to Ms Bensily, the Sri Lankan government is looking to develop public housing and



#### GOING BIG

One of Prime Structures' most high profile projects is integrated casino resort Okada Manila, which consists of a glass dome 106m in diameter and 30m high, which the owners plan to house an indoor beach.



improve the quality of the living environment for its residents. This is an opportunity that Prime Structures is intending to seize.

The company is in the process of bidding to build low-cost housing in Sri Lanka, similar to Singapore's Housing Development Board projects during the 1960s.

In addition, if its brick manufacturing is successful, the company intends to export this knowhow to either Africa or India where there is an abundance of the waste materials needed such as flyash or rice husk. The company is in talks with International Enterprise (IE) Singapore to acquire intellectual property rights to do it on a bigger scale.

#### KEEPING UP

Just like the fast-changing fashion world, the company also needs to be aware of the latest architectural designs and building envelopes around the world. This ensures that it is able to keep up with competition overseas and that its designs and technological expertise remain cutting edge.

One market that it is looking to penetrate is the Middle East, especially Dubai and Qatar. Says Mr Bensily: "We started planting our seeds in Dubai in January, which means finding the right people to work with, the right connections, before we go full-scale."

He describes Prime Structures Engineering as being supported by four legs, with the first leg being its home base Singapore, the second is the Philippines, the third Sri Lanka, and the fourth will be the United Arab Emirates.

He adds: "By the end of the year, once we secure a project there, we would have anchored in Dubai." With the World Expo taking place in Dubai in 2020, he sees another phase of growth taking place in the region that he wants to ride on.

Over a period of the past few months, the company has received quotes of more than US\$200 million worth of projects, he reveals.

But while Prime Structures has reached a stage where it has the capacity and confidence to take on projects worth

“THINK LIKE A WOMAN BUT ACT LIKE A MAN, MY PARENTS ALWAYS TELL ME. THIS MEANS BEING SENSITIVE TO WHAT’S AROUND YOU, BUT DON’T LET YOUR FEELINGS SHOW.”

– **Julia Bensily** (centre), *associate director, with her father, Sonny Bensily* (left), *founder and managing director, Prime Structures*



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

over S\$100 million, some of its long-time clients are still under the impression that it can only handle small projects. Says Mr Bensily: “They only look for Prime when they have a difficult job. But we want to stretch it further and do larger scale jobs.”

As a result, the company went through a rebranding process in mid-2016 to let clients – both old and new – know its capabilities and what it can do. With the support of Spring Singapore, the company hired an external consultant to figure out how it wants to present its brand and ensure that all its subsidiaries and employees are all on the same page.

It will also boast a brand new logo to be rolled out by October. Ms Bensily says: “To most people, a logo is a logo, but to us, it represents our story. The buildings in our logo are in different dimensions, and this is what we are in the business of doing. Our tagline has become ‘Big Challenges, Bigger Solutions’. We wanted to show people that we are in the business of building complex structures.”

The rebranding aims to prepare the company for its targeted exponential growth of S\$250 million by 2026, as well as to attract qualified people to join them, she adds.

To further equip itself for its expansion plans, Prime Structure has bought a new factory nearby to accommodate its rapidly

growing numbers. The new place has a built-up area of at least 30,000 sq ft compared to the current location’s 10,000 sq ft.

Mr Bensily jokes that at the current premises, they are already “up to their neck” when it comes to working space. He quips: “Wherever we can put a table, we put a table.”

The new building is being renovated, and the opening ceremony is slated for December 2017.

#### ALL IN THE FAMILY

If anyone is wondering why financial controller and family matriarch Mrs Bensily was not included in the interview, it is because she is publicity shy, Mr Bensily reveals.

But make no mistake, her role in the family business cannot be discounted. There were many times when the business first began that he had to be away from his family, so Mrs Bensily took charge of the situation at home, tending to the needs of their three young daughters, he shares. “Having a supportive wife is very important,” he says.

In fact, he was not even around for the birth of their second daughter Sofia, he recalls. But more than two decades on, she will soon be the fourth addition to the family business. She is currently doing her Master’s degree in innovation, entrepreneurship and management at London’s Imperial College and intends to join

the business when she returns next year.

According to Mr Bensily, she had to be coaxed into furthering her studies even though she was raring to start work right away. This is to ensure that she gets a good foundation in business, he adds.

As for Julia, who joined the business in 2012, her main motivation when she first started was simply to help out. She says: “I didn’t have the intention to stay for the long term. It was more like, if there was a need for me to be there, I would be there. But if there’s no need for my input, I don’t want to be someone who sits around and earns a salary without doing anything.”

She now manages investor relations and business development for Prime Structures. But while her father describes her as “street-smart”, her journey was anything but smooth. When she first stepped in as a young woman into a male-dominated industry, she received a number of sexist remarks.

Being the boss’s daughter did not help. “People would question what I’m doing there,” she recalls. “But five years down the road, the stigma is a lot less prevalent.”

Now, she has found her voice, Ms Bensily says. “What have I learned since I started? Think like a woman, but act like a man, my parents always tell me. This means being sensitive to what’s around you, but don’t let your feelings show.” She adds: “At the end of the day, whether you work for family or outside, you have to deliver in whatever you do.”

But while Prime Structure is described as a family business, this does not mean that only blood relations can run the company.

Mr Bensily intends to start slowing down when he turns 60 in four years’ time, and has put some serious thought into his succession plans. He says: “To manage this company successfully, you need at least 10-15 years of experience to take the helm of the ship. It doesn’t just come with a university degree.

“My daughters are like the third generation. The second generation are my staff who have been with me for a long time. When I retire, this second generation will be the ones who will take the helm of the company.”

He might be intending to prepare to slow down, but the business certainly is not. With its upcoming plans, new building and ambitious goals lined up, Prime Structures is going full throttle.

While there are no firm plans as yet, Mr Bensily reveals that the company is also exploring the opportunity to list in either Singapore or Hong Kong. He adds: “It’s not about a fast exit. It’s about expanding the company to the next level.” ■