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Michael Willhite
President
Willhite Grading & Excavation

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DIGGING WITH A TWIST

TAPPING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND FEARLESS EXPLORATION OF NEW TOOLS OPENS UNIQUE GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES FOR A YOUNG CALIFORNIA COAST CONSTRUCTION ENTREPRENEUR

STORY: SUZAN CHIN-TAYLOR PHOTOS: MATT DAYKA

Construction is in his blood for Michael Willhite. This social media influencer of the excavation and pushing dirt industry has built a dynamic business model and gathered some of the most innovative and cutting-edge tools in the market for his fleet, based in Santa Barbara, California.

Willhite Grading & Excavation, tapped as a beta tester by some of the world's leading manufacturers in excavation technology, has positioned itself as a thought leader and forward-thinking firm, capable of taking on some of the region's most challenging projects and making even the everyday grading projects more efficient and cost-effective.

AT A TENDER AGE

Willhite, president of Willhite Grading & Excavation, got his start in the construction trades, working

alongside his father in the family roofing business during holiday breaks and summer vacation from school. He also grew up with a local boy from a multigenerational grading and excavation firm in his teens.

Willhite looked up to this young man and his father. He had great respect for the family as a whole and eventually would receive mentoring at this company, giving him the skills, knowledge and work habits needed to launch his career in the heavy civil industry and eventually start his own firm in 2011.

Like any new startup, especially in the construction trade, Willhite faced the common challenge of acquiring necessary funding to procure the needed equipment to launch his venture. The banks were not welcoming or encouraging, but local Caterpillar dealer Quinn Caterpillar of Oxnard saw the potential and gave Willhite a small credit line to get him started, and the

rest is history. Quinn Caterpillar took a chance on this go-getter construction worker who wanted to be his own boss and it paid dividends.

“They were the first and only company that would really give me a chance, and because of their treatment, I’ve never felt the need to go anywhere else,” Willhite says. “We can always find top-notch solutions and the support we need, so we try to be a 100% Quinn Caterpillar company.”

The fleet now consists of wide array of Caterpillar equipment, including but not limited to a 315F hydraulic excavator a 308E2 hydraulic excavator with a Trimble earthworks platform and engcon tiltrotator, multiple compact track loaders and numerous attachments, support vehicles and related tools, with more being added as the market demands.

Willhite’s approach is to never force the wrong equipment on a job, instead working closely with its clients to determine the best machinery and processes for the environment.

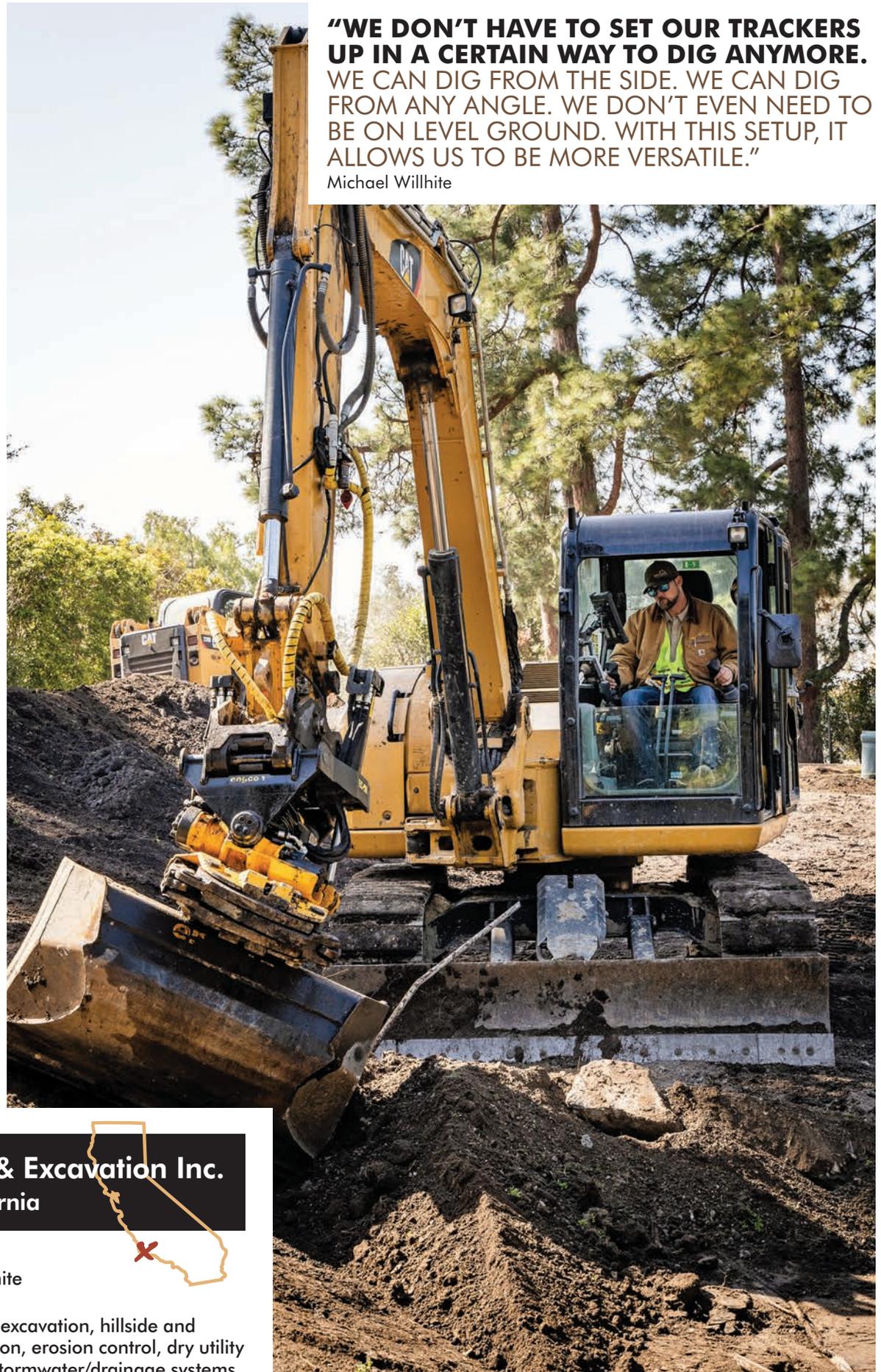
ACCIDENTAL SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER

Access to the right information that would help determine how to build the right equipment fleet and build the specialized knowledge for his new business to succeed was not readily available through traditional methods. Being on his own meant he no longer had easy real-world access to those who could mentor him. What could he do?

Willhite turned to what some might consider an unlikely source — social media. Instagram and Facebook held a lot of valuable information and real-world experiences from his peers, and Willhite discovered he could use this to hone his craft. He began to engage and create online

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Michael Willhite



Willhite Grading & Excavation Inc. Santa Barbara, California

- FOUNDED:** 2011
- OWNER:** Michael Willhite
- EMPLOYEES:** 14
- SERVICES:** Grading and excavation, hillside and soil stabilization, erosion control, dry utility installation, stormwater/drainage systems
- SERVICE AREA:** Central California coast
- WEBSITE:** www.willhitegrading.com

Michael Willhite, president of Willhite Grading & Excavation, cuts terraces into a hillside using a CAT 308E2 fitted with an engcon EC209 tiltrotator.

Extending for brand visibility

As the president of Willhite Grading & Excavation, Michael Willhite understands the importance of brand awareness and that extending it into other areas of your life can bring a positive impact to the bottom line.

In addition to his popularity on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn for his Santa Barbara, California-based construction business, Willhite is heavily tied to the motocross freestyle world and actively networks that circle of influence. Networking doesn't always stay within the confines of handing out business cards, shaking hands and asking for referrals.

A good example of this was a chance opportunity to work with X Games gold medalist Jarryd McNeil on the production of a video for a competitive entry for Real Moto for the X Games, which was released in autumn 2019. Hearing about the video contest, Willhite extended an invitation to McNeil to shoot his video at a location Willhite had access to and provide his excavation equipment for use.

"Sometimes you just got to put yourself out there and be willing to do things for the love of it, regardless of money, extend yourself beyond the normal boundaries," Willhite says. "The rewards are limitless, whatever it costs, it always comes back somehow."

Willhite shares of his experience with the video shoot. As a result of his participation in the project, the connections made and new heightened visibility of his brand have been outstanding. It also yielded stronger results over traditional advertising previously used for building business and brand awareness for his firm.

"Be open to take the risk of investing some of your time, resources and being connected in unique places. People do notice, and they will remember your name," he says.

friendships on various social media platforms with other construction pros his age who were either employed at larger firms or like him: out on their own. When an issue arose, he would take it to his connections and wasn't shy about asking for advice and, in turn, sharing advice. What happened next was totally unexpected.

"These conversations on Instagram started creating a following for me that's now over 30,000 on Instagram along with another platform that has over 30,000 followers as well," Willhite says. "It's all related to the grading industry, and we follow the latest tech and talk about the things we're working on. It's created a wide-open platform where we can get honest answers from those who are doing what we do every day."

Becoming a social media influencer in the excavation market segment caught the attention of equipment manufacturers who approached Willhite about beta-testing products and reviewing them on his social media feeds.

This gave him a unique opportunity to incorporate cutting-edge technologies into his business while helping the manufacturers at the beginning stages of their product development to debug production models. This was done with the understanding that Willhite would always maintain his integrity through the reviewing process and make honest posts on social media, being able to say what he wished, good or not, about the product.

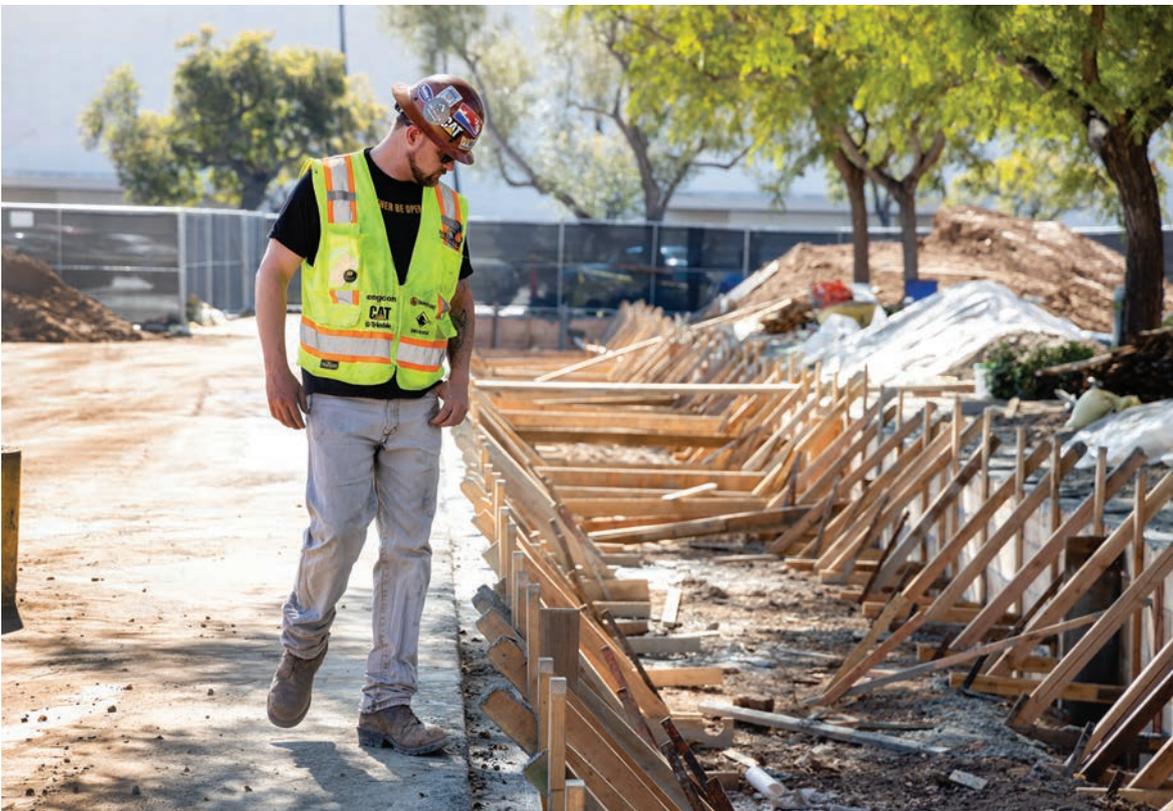
One such testing opportunity led Willhite to start running one of the first engcon tiltrotator systems in the U.S. It was love at first dig for him and his crew. "We don't have to set our trackers up in a certain way to dig anymore," Willhite says. "We can dig from the side. We can dig from any angle. We don't even need to be on level ground. With this setup, it allows us to be more versatile."

When working in tandem with the Trimble earthworks control platform, Willhite's excavators and specialty tools, like the tiltrotator, extend the crew's capabilities and efficiency. The control platform essentially makes the control stick the boom of the excavator. It combines what would be done with a stick and rod, for example, to take elevations for the depth of a trench line and makes the excavator capable of performing this to eliminate the setup of an extra component.

The Trimble earthworks interface is all visually driven and intuitive, making learning to use it fairly simple and straightforward for the operator.

With these tools, the process is streamlined and the crew gets its benchmark off the hub set by the surveyor for the site. They set up a laser and bench out at that hub and catch the laser beam, track it to wherever desired with a straight eye shot and then catch that laser again. The system will calculate how much elevation change has been made from the tracking of one spot to the other, pinpointing exactly where the operator is in relation to that hub. This is especially helpful with trench lines, drainage systems and even more so with cutting slopes.

Michael Willhite surveys the work performed on a line his company excavated on a commercial job site in Santa Barbara, California.



A SOLID BASE

Even with all of this great technology, Willhite understands the value of having a solid core base knowledge of what they do, the old-school way. He teaches his crew members to perform their tasks with string lines and eye levels.

“If you know how to use the basics, then you can transfer that knowledge into any of the technologies we have,” Willhite says. “It all works off the same concept, which is a flat level plane. It doesn’t matter if it’s a string line or a laser line: Once you have that understanding, it will work no matter the method.”

One advantage Willhite has over other excavating or grading contractors is his background and experience in the IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) in various roles on projects for underground utilities, oil fields, pipelines, flanging steel lines and the like.

“We aren’t pigeon-holed here as being just grading contractors,” Willhite says. “This experience means we can take on a wide array of commercial projects that include dry utility installation, conduits, drainage systems, detention and retention systems, as well as road building up to the point of asphalt — that we don’t provide.”

With such a solid base of experience and knowledge, taking on high-risk or challenging projects others may shy away from puts Willhite in a position to participate in projects that stretch his talents and equipment, something he thoroughly enjoys. One such project was a hillside restabilization in a Santa Barbara apartment complex that provided an interesting opportunity to grow his skills and put his new tiltrotator tool to the test.

When the units were constructed in the 1980s, several of the complex’s two-story buildings were situated very close to a hillside that had been cut away to allow for the construction, but choice of material and position of the buildings were now creating severe issues. A retaining wall had been constructed against the original slope and the buildings placed just 3 to 4 feet from it. Behind the wall, the soil consisted primarily of alluvium, a highly silty material. During rain events, water, naturally taking the easiest route out, would push through this 600-foot-long by 50-foot-high by 3-foot-deep material that made up the slope behind the wall and would create slip planes in sections of the slope material.

This slow sliding and loss of the slope’s material into the rear sections of the building was addressed for 20 years using various “Band-Aid” measures, and after 20 years of repeated slides, the buildings were red-tagged to preclude occupants from getting injured in the event of a catastrophic slide of the 13,000 yards, 20,000 metric tons of material on the slope.

The complex owners preferred not to remove the existing walls, which is not something that Willhite advocated. “We don’t believe in walls being used to retain any material,” he says. “Walls should be used to basically establish grade breaks. When we are tasked with redoing a slope, we build that slope so it can be freestanding without any wall.”

Juan Talavera operates a CAT 239D, shuttling dirt while Willhite excavates at a residence job site in Montecito, California.



Willhite sets up the Trimble Earthworks grade control system used to enhance productivity.



For this hillside restabilization, all mini equipment was utilized due to the compact footprint of the work area and access points. The first step was to ramp up over the existing wall, get under the slope and create the first bench. This was approximately at the top of the wall. It was cut out about 10 feet wide the full length of the slope and was completed in 200-foot sections on the ini-

“THE OPPORTUNITIES AND EARNING POTENTIAL ARE STRONG IN THE CONSTRUCTION FIELDS. WORKING IN THE TRADES SHOULD BE GIVEN SERIOUS CONSIDERATION IF SOMEONE IS LOOKING FOR A POSITION WITH UPWARD FINANCIAL MOBILITY AND THE CHANCE TO BE CHALLENGED AND PART OF CREATING SOMETHING THAT WILL IMPACT LIVES FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.”

Michael Willhite

tial pass. The material that was cut out was moved to an area where it could be cleaned, mixed and made uniform in consistency.

The next step involved digging down into the earth to reach competent solid material to create keyways behind the wall. The entire hillside would now be built upon these keyways that would be back-sloped in tiers. In addition to proper compaction, on the backside of each of the keyways, a French drain drainage system was installed, and that was surrounded by rock. This was placed at every 10 to 15 feet in elevation rise. By installing these drains, underground flow would be naturally directed through the rock, into the pipes and then diverted to the face of the slope in a controlled manner.

The project environment was difficult and demanding, but Willhite’s compact equipment made what seemed impossible, possible.

“It was tedious and dangerous working on the slopes,” Willhite says. “With the tiltrotator, we were safely able to slope at extreme angles within very tight spaces. Sometimes we were working on benches no wider than 6 inches beyond the width of the tractor so having that safe maneuverability was crucial.”

The project also involved connecting the original natural, stable slope to the newly created one. This required the incorporation of geogrid fabric, which was laid in at every 24 inches in vertical height point to ensure there will not be future movement on the hillside. The entire hillside stabilization took approximately nine months to complete, and the apartment buildings affected have regained occupancy status.

CHALLENGES OF A DIFFERENT NATURE

Projects that test the team to be innovative are the easy ones for Willhite. Business financial-related issues, common to all service businesses, are a bit more difficult to work through sometimes and he takes it as part of the nature of the work. However, Willhite feels there are some things the industry, as a whole, needs to talk about more openly to create positive change for how contractors are viewed professionally and treated in the course of business transactions.

“Contractors, all of us, we’re out here gambling: We put it all on the line each time we sign a contract,” Willhite says. “We’re a risky business that banks aren’t friendly toward until we really don’t need the funding. Receivables, cash flow, and being paid in a timely manner so you can meet your obligations and take care of your crew and family — money, it’s an uncomfortable subject, and it’s the 800-pound gorilla in the room that needs to be dealt with.”

While waiting for the business financial climate to change, Willhite has found that a few technology tools have been a tremendous help in reducing some of the stress that comes with administering and managing the business side of contracting.

One of his and his crew’s favorites is busybusy, a tracking system for job site management that is easily installed and used on all the team member’s smartphones. Using geofence triggers, the busybusy app sends out important alerts and notices to team members so they can work more effectively together and it also provides important coding facilities so line-item billing, cost tracking and profitability analysis are accurate and easy to understand.



The engcon EC209 tiltrotator provides Willhite and his crew with new capabilities including digging from any angle on unlevel ground.

WHAT'S AHEAD

Willhite plans to reinvest and expand his service coverage area to cover the California coastline from Malibu to Morro Bay and inland to Paso Robles with offices in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties. He dreams that someday it can be a multigenerational family business, as Willhite has been grooming his young son since the age of 3 (he’s now 5), training him to operate his own bucket machine alongside dad in the mini-excavator cab. For him, the sense of family is what has always been at the core of the most successful businesses he has worked in, and this is true for his business model as well.

“I’m grooming him to be a powerhouse in this industry, if he chooses to go down this path,” Willhite says. “I’m hoping he will carry on my legacy, but if he doesn’t, that’s OK too because what I will have done for him is instilled base knowledge of how to do something, skills that he can fall back on for the rest of his life that no one can take away from him.”

Willhite also wants to help encourage young people to enter the trades, to let go of the notion that college and corporate worlds are the only options for a good life.

“The opportunities and earning potential are strong in the construction fields,” Willhite says. “Working in the trades should be given serious consideration if someone is looking for a position with upward financial mobility and the chance to be challenged and part of creating something that will impact lives for generations to come.” ▼

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