

An architect of student learning

Aaron Jobson, President and CEO of Quattrocchi Kwok Architects in Santa Rosa, knows the way schools are designed affects the success of their attendees

By KATHRYN REED
For the North Bay Business Journal

It's not just what's in a textbook or the teacher that matter in the learning process. Also important is the building in which all of it takes place.

Quattrocchi Kwok Architects in Santa Rosa is well aware of that fact.

"We are focused on making a difference in the schools and communities we work in by improving learning environment quality, sustainability and equity," CEO and President Aaron Jobson said.

This is done by making sure buildings are designed with good ventilation, day lighting, access to the outdoors, ensuring they are neither too hot nor too cold, and that they have good acoustics.

"All of those things impact how students learned," the 45-year-old Jobson explained. "We incorporate evidence-based design strategies into what we do."

Some of QKA's local projects include work on Cardinal Newman High School after it burned in the 2017 Tubbs Fire, San Marin High School's STEM Center,

Healdsburg High School's track, field and gymnasium, Cove School in Corte Madera, Windsor High School, and the Geospatial Science Center at Piner High School in Santa Rosa.

In the company's 36-year history is has completed more than \$2.5 billion in projects.

The following is a Q&A between the Business Journal and Jobson that has been edited for space and clarity.

QKA is a leader in designing K-12 education facilities. What is different about working on these types of buildings compared to others?

I think one of the biggest differences is the fact that we are working with many clients and stakeholders on each project: school district leaders, teachers, staff, parents and most of all, students. They are all working toward a common goal, but don't always see things the same way. One of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of designing schools is collaborating with all of

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CEO SPOTLIGHT

In this monthly series, the Business Journal talks with those who occupy the top spot in a local organization, asking about their professional and personal opportunities and challenges.

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AARON JOBSON
Quattrocchi Kwok Architects CEO and President Aaron Jobson befriends stray dogs while backpacking in Peru in 2022.

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these different groups to find solutions that make the school a better environment for everyone.

Schools have such a profound impact on our communities and our future and it's great to be able to contribute to that through our work.

What goals do you have for the company in the next five years?

The firm has grown to become the largest North Bay architecture firm, which is exceptional, especially since we serve just one market — education. In the last five or so years, we have opened a second office in Oakland, created an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan), and became the only North Bay company to become JUST certified in an effort to validate and strengthen our social justice and equity policies and practices. Over the next five years we want to build on our strengths and culture and continue our trajectory of steady growth one school district and project at a time.

In late 2022, you became CEO when founders Mark Quattrocchi and Steve Kwok stepped away from day-to-day operations. How has it been to take over for them and now be the top guy?

Having spent the bulk of my more than 20-year career at QKA, I've certainly grown up here and the transition to taking on more firm-wide management responsibility has been gradual. I will admit, though, it still feels a bit strange when Mark and Steve look to me to make a final decision about something instead of the other way around. We have a great management team, and I'm working alongside my fellow principals to lead the firm day in and day out.

What aspect about your business keeps you up at night?

I try to keep a healthy balance, but when something does keep me up it is usually because I am thinking about how to balance our workload with the capacity of our staff without causing burnout. This has been a real challenge over the past few years.

What is your approach to making tough and important business decisions?

I try to think about difficult decisions from a number of different perspectives, including listening to multiple people within the firm about their



AARON JOBSON

Quattrocchi Kwok Architects CEO-President Aaron Jobson spends time with his children Bodhi and Maya and wife, Alice, right.

thoughts and ideas. I also like to do the work to get into the details and make sure I understand the challenges before making important decisions. We work collaboratively as a management team to evaluate problems and come up with solutions. Ultimately, everything comes down to what is going to be best in the long term for QKA and our employee owners.

What lesson did you learn early in your career that you now recognize as an important one?

One thing I learned early on from Mark and Steve is to address a problem directly, focusing on finding a solution rather than trying to deflect responsibility or figure out who is at fault. As Steve always said, "Run toward trouble."

How do you motivate people?

More than anything I've found the best way to motivate people is to show them that you care about them as people, as well as their career development.

It's also important that you demonstrate you have a passion for the work you are doing together.

What are the benefits and drawbacks to being located in the North Bay?

It's a beautiful place to live and a wonderful community to be part of, which is probably the biggest benefit. The biggest challenge is that it is a relatively small community and that can be difficult in terms of recruiting new employees. This is one of the main reasons we opened an East Bay office. Our Oakland location allows for increased recruiting and better service to our clients throughout the greater Bay Area.

What one government regulation would you change and why?

More than a regulation, I would change some of the funding priorities. We spend more than five times as much on each prison inmate as we do on each school student. Schools are severely underfunded.

Tell us a little bit about Homes for Sonoma.

Homes for Sonoma is a nonprofit organization that I helped to start immediately after the 2017 fires. It began as a group from QKA, other design firms and leaders of community organizations

to find a way to help so many that were displaced. We focused on an idea to build housing that could be deployed quickly and then repurposed as accessory dwelling units in backyards to serve as permanent affordable housing.

How do you spend your time outside of work?

I try to be outside and with my family as much as possible. I enjoy hiking, backpacking and trail running in Sonoma County and around California. I also love going to the beach with my wife and two teenage kids, as well as bringing them along on adventures. We also really enjoy traveling to explore new countries and places.

What advice would you give someone just starting his or her career in your industry?

Ask lots of questions. Becoming an architect is a continuous and never-ending learning process. It's important to be curious about what you are working on and talk with your co-workers about it so you learn as much as possible at every step. The strong leaders and mentors will be happy to help you learn.