

Mr. Karnas goes to Washington to represent contractors



RANDY SINGER | NMBW

BY STEVE GINSBERG | SPECIAL TO NMBW

On May 26, Chet Karnas testified before a congressional subcommittee in Washington, D.C., describing a life and death struggle for his company, Lone Sun Builders.

Karnas, 53, is battling both a persistent recession and Carpenters Union Local 1319 for survival. He has emerged as a national spokesman for the construction industry in its defense against the United

Brotherhood of Carpenters banner campaign. Speaking on behalf of the Associated Builders and Contractors' 23,000 merit shops employing 2 million nonunion workers, Karnas sought Congress' support against the union's tactics, which he described as unethical.

An aggressive counteroffensive against the union's picket lines has put a bull's-eye on Karnas and his company. Instead of standing by while the union pickets his job sites, Karnas has staged counterdemon-

strations with banners presenting his side of the pay/benefits story. He also has created a press campaign, writing op-ed articles, and started a blog to highlight his company's benefits and refute the union at Lonesun.wordpress.com. Karnas stresses he is not against unions, but maintains the carpenters are a "rogue" union not affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

When the union sent its pickets to Karnas' office on Edith Boulevard in January, one of them was photographed showing

Karnas his sidearm holster. Karnas called the police and then the press.

Karnas is convinced that the union has no interest in trying to unionize his company, but wants to demonize it and destroy it. He says he sat down with the union's leader in California, Hal Jensen, but the two were unable to reach a truce. The union has not formally asked for a vote in his shop, Karnas says.

Jensen has declined to discuss Karnas, his company or the campaign in New Mexico with the media.

The union's three-year banner campaign has taken an economic toll, Karnas says. His company had contracts rescinded. He says clients think if they hire him, they will have their construction sites picketed and get a bad name. This, Karnas believes, has partially contributed to Lone Sun's revenue falling from a peak of \$8 million to less than \$4 million. Its work force has shrunk from 110 to 55, but Karnas refuses to back down.

Within days of returning to Albuquerque after testifying before the labor subcommittee, whose members include Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, pickets appeared at Karnas' job sites.

"I was ambivalent about going to Washington, but this was a rare opportunity. But it wasn't easy for me. I'm not anti-union. I've been part of unions during my careers, and my wife [MaryEllen] is a member of the teachers' union," Karnas said. "I made a stand locally and got recognition on a national level."

Other contractors throughout the country are calling Karnas, asking his advice on how to handle pickets at their job sites. The pickets' banners often proclaim, "Shame

on [name of company] ..." and assert benefits and fair wages are not being paid. Karnas' campaign seeks to get the word out that his employees receive solid benefits and are paid by check and not cash, as the union claims.

Lone Sun does drywall construction on big box stores, restaurants, schools and churches. Karnas says he has been able to remain in business because his primary lender, Southwest Securities, adjusted his credit line. Karnas also credits Bill Dolan for green lighting his refinancing and saving the company. Jaynes Corp., Bradbury Stamm and Hart Design & Construction have been loyal to Karnas and continue to give him subcontracting work, he says.

Jersey boy

Fighting back was instilled in Karnas growing up as an all-state football player in Montclair, N.J. He was raised by a tough Italian mother who was a role model for a tenacious approach to life and business. Karnas' father died at age 50 of a heart attack while playing basketball.

Karnas' life took a Western detour when his neighbor Elaine, the sister of Jaynes Cos. Chairman and CEO Don Power, suggested he give New Mexico a look.

He transferred to the University of New Mexico and worked summers on Jaynes' construction jobs. He worked on the construction crew that built Intel's first plant in Rio Rancho in the late 1970s.

Jaynes hired Karnas as a junior estimator, but his entrepreneurial DNA led him to take courses at UNM that gave him the accounting and management skills to start

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a business.

He opened Four Suns Builders in 1987, partnering with Randy Orbesen. The business grew steadily, and by 2008, Karnas bought out his partner and changed the name of the company to Lone Sun.

Of Karnas' six children, two, Peter and Mason, work at Lone Sun. Karnas lost his youngest son, Chestin, in 2003 to a rare genetic defect, and proudly shows photos of the 2-year-old to guests. He says Chestin's spirit and good nature remain an inspiration.

The walls of his office feature rock 'n' roll artwork that could easily find a home in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Karnas, a Grateful Dead devotee, has attended 65 of the band's concerts, often going backstage to rub elbows with rock's elder statesmen. For a decade, he would spend parts of weekends selling tie-dyed T-shirts at the New Mexico State Fairgrounds' flea market, but now his free time is spent in his North Valley vegetable garden.

"I've been gardening since I was 8 years old, and I'm a tried and true nonpedigreed, all-organic master gardener. We have three freezers at home, and we can a lot of what we grow. I make a mean stuffed pepper with my pico de gallo."

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