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## Carlsbad Builder Made a Career Building Affordable Housing

CONSTRUCTION: Sun Country Has Built, Renovated Over 8,000 Units

BY RAY HUARD

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CARLSBAD – A Carlsbad construction company that started as a two-person operation more than 40 years ago has become one of the primary builders of affordable housing in San Diego County.



John Ahlswede  
President  
Sun Country Builders

John Ahlswede founded Sun Country Builders in 1979 after getting his start in the construction industry as a laborer pouring concrete, a job he took as an alternative to working in his father's wholesale nursery business.

The company has since evolved to be one of the most prolific affordable housing builders in San Diego County, having built or renovated more than 113 projects with more than 8,000 housing units.

Among Sun Country's clients are BRIDGE Housing

Corp., Community Housing Works, Wakeland Housing & Development Corp., and San Diego Interfaith Housing Foundation.

Recent projects include the \$75.2 million City Heights Place and City Heights Plaza by Wakeland Housing and Price Philanthropies, the \$53 million Amanecer apartment complex by Community HousingWorks in Linda Vista.

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Interfaith Housing President Matt Jumper said that he considers Ahlswede and Sun Country as his go-to contractor.

“I’ve had very successful endeavors with them and I’m glad I

found them,” Jumper said.

They included a Poway project that had a creek that had to be turned into a natural flood channel.

“We had to plant indigenous species of plants, we had to put in a big culvert and make it a natural habitat as well,” Jumper said. “They had to negotiate all that stuff, work with me, and at the same time, build a building. They really came through. The coordination was just fantastic. I would consider them highly professional and very cooperative.”

Mary Jane Jagodzinski, BRIDGE Housing senior vice president of development, said that she’s worked on more than 20 projects with Sun Country, most before she joined BRIDGE and worked for another affordable housing development.



*Matt Jumper  
President  
San Diego Interfaith Housing Foundation  
BRIDGE Housing*



Mary Jane Jagodzinski  
SVP, Development  
BRIDGE Housing

“My experience with them ranged from both new construction, including some that were really pioneering in sustainability, as well as major renovation,” Jagodzinski said. “I think that they really look at truly trying to be a partner with affordable housing developers and owners in getting to a successful completion.”

Since the beginning, Sun Country has focused exclusively on building affordable housing projects that use state and federal financing, but Ahlswede said he’d like to branch out and do some market-rate housing.

## It’s ‘About the Relationships’

“We never really felt we had to reach out to market rate, but we want to reach out at some point,” Ahlswede said. “That would be a new market for us and we’re actively looking at it.”

In 1987, the company build one of the first two projects to receive funding through the federal Low-Income Tax Credit program.

“Since we first started building affordable housing, I think we can say that the cost per square foot has gone up 10 times,” Ahlswede said.

Among the projects that stand out for Ahlswede is the \$27 million North Park Seniors built by Community HousingWorks in 2018.

With 76 apartments, North Park Seniors was special because of the population it serves, Ahlswede said. It was the first affordable housing project in San Diego that was geared toward the LGBTQ community, although the apartments weren’t restricted to LGBTQ tenants.

Another that stands out for Ahlswede, also because of the people it serves, is Home Front at Camp Anza by Wakeland Housing in Riverside, a 30-unit apartment project for veterans that involved the restoration of an historic officer's club from the World War II era.

"It's where Army officers would go before they shipped out to the Pacific," Ahlswede said. "This project was leaning. Literally, the building was tilted. We completely rehabilitated it and put it into as close to original condition as we could."

Although it started small, by 2024, Sun Country Builders had grown to have a full-time staff of 110, and Ahlswede said that he expects to stay about that size.

"That's really as big as we can be while maintaining our level of service," Ahlswede said, adding that "I don't care about being the biggest."

"We've never been about building everything that anybody will let us build. It's always about the relationships," Ahlswede said.

## Drawn to Construction Business

As a high school student growing up in Vista, Ahlswede said that he wasn't interested in going to college but went to work in a wholesale nursery that his father owned, Ahlswede Wholesale Nursery.

While there, he built a shade structure and liked the work.

"I stood back and looked at that and felt a sense of satisfaction. Then I looked down and saw these little plants growing. I figured I could either go out and build stuff or I could watch plants grow. I opted to build stuff and I went to work on a concrete crew as a laborer," Ahlswede said. "It progressed from there."

Soon after he started his own company in 1979, the economy sunk into a recession and Ahlswede said that he grabbed whatever work he could get.

“I would build fences, patio covers -anything I could for anyone who would let me,” Ahlswede said.

His two sons aged 35 and 37 never showed an interest in following their father in the construction business.

Ahlswede said that he has maintained the sense of wonder that first drew him into construction.

“I’m in awe of the fact that we’re building something that will be here to serve society long after we’re gone,” Ahlswede said.

### **Sun Country Builders**

FOUNDED: 1979

HEADQUARTERS: Carlsbad

PRESIDENT: John Ahlswede

BUSINESS: general contractor

EMPLOYEES: 110

WEBSITE: [www.suncountrybuilders.net](http://www.suncountrybuilders.net)

CONTACT: 760-630-8042

NOTABLE: Sun Country Builders has built or renovated more than 8,700 housing units throughout California.

<https://www.sdbj.com/real-estate/carlsbad-builder-made-a-career-building-affordable-housing/>