

After tragedy, Pebb Enterprises moves onward and upward

Pebb Enterprises picks itself up after the loss of seven employees in a plane crash

By: Joel Groover



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family-owned company in the fall of 2015.

In November Pebb Enterprises lost seven people — principals Jared Weiner and Ori Rom and five employees — in a plane crash in Akron, Ohio. That team, which comprised nearly half the firm, had flown to the Midwest on a retail property scouting trip and a tour of the firm’s growing portfolio of owned assets. The chartered Hawker 700A was headed to the Akron airport when it clipped some power lines and crashed into an apartment building. All nine who were on board, including the pilots, were killed.

At the time of the crash, 42-year-old Pebb Enterprises was transitioning to a new strategy and to its next generation of leadership. Bruce Weiner, who started the business in 1973 with his father, Paul, and who remains a principal, had handed over day-to-day operations to his sons, Jared and Ian. As the brothers grew into their new management roles, they also began pursuing a joint vision for the company’s future. For 35 years Pebb Enterprises focused primarily on office and retail properties in the densely packed South Florida market, but distressed assets in the three-county area were growing scarce by 2011. The brothers wanted to branch out. “As value-add buyers, we were not finding as many opportunities in South Florida, so that made us look elsewhere,” Ian Weiner said. “Starting in 2012 we made the decision to go outside of our backyard.”

In its first out-of-state acquisition, Pebb Enterprises bought Walden Park, a 60,000-square-foot shopping center across from Lakeline Mall, in Austin, Texas, in March 2013. The company brought in HomeGoods and Ulta Beauty to fill two major vacancies at the center, which is shadow-anchored by a SuperTarget. “We saw that times were different,” Ian Weiner said. “We could go in and operate properties outside of Florida.” In a further

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connections only heightened the grief. The tragedy was devastating for all the families, of course, but the losses endured by the Weiners were particularly heavy: Bruce Weiner lost both a son and a son-in-law; Ian Weiner, who had to break the news of the crash to his parents, lost both his new brother-in-law and his older brother, who was 35. “I lived in the same neighborhood as my brother,” Ian Weiner said. “Jared and I worked together and our kids were in school together. I saw him pretty much seven days a week.” At the Boca Raton office, the brothers worked literally side by side. “His office was next door to mine, so I walk by it every day,” Ian Weiner said. “Never an hour or a day goes by when I don’t think of what happened.”

The crash took the lives of Gary Shapiro, 35, director of leasing; Diane Smoot, 50, head of property accounting and lease administration; Diana Suriel, 32, an assistant project manager; Thomas Virgin, 31, director of construction and development; and Nick Weaver, 36, property manager. Five of the seven colleagues were starting new families with young children.

The loss of Jared Weiner was a devastating blow from a business standpoint as well. Ian Weiner, who earned his law degree from Yeshiva University’s Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, focused on financial matters and served as corporate counsel, but Jared was the larger-than-life face of Pebb Enterprises. “Jared was very extroverted. He never took no as an answer from anyone,” said Rachel Elias Wein, president of WeinPlus, a real estate strategy consulting firm that has worked with Pebb Enterprises since January 2015. “In his eulogy for Jared, Ian said that if his brother couldn’t get in the front door, he would come in the side door. If he couldn’t get in the side door, he would bulldoze the wall down. That was just how he got things done.”

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out.” At the time — the mid-2000s — Pebb was best known for owning smaller, class-B properties populated by mom-and-pop stores. Ian Weiner credits his brother for making the leap to the next level.

“From development, to the entitlement process, to leasing, I would say that Isla Verde was 99 percent Jared’s undertaking,” Ian Weiner said. “It definitely propelled us into the national arena, where we developed, and still maintain, great relationships with a lot of national tenants.” The experience, he says, led to Pebb’s development of Buckingham Square, just to the north of Isla Verde, in Royal Palm Beach. That 95,000-square-foot shopping center sold for \$28.6 million in February 2016.

Before the accident, Pebb Enterprises had made strides in its efforts to find opportunities across the eastern half of the U.S. “They were looking with fresh eyes at shopping centers that had been forgotten by the local community but that happened to be in just the right location and could be turned into something fantastic,” Wein said. At the same time, she notes, Pebb Enterprises continued to cultivate relationships with tenants like Fresh Thyme Farmers Market, a Meijer concept that blends elements of Whole Foods and Sprouts. Toward the end of 2014, Pebb Enterprises closed on two acquisitions; over the next year, the firm bought properties for redevelopment in such markets as Davenport, Iowa; and West St. Paul, Minn., according to Rob Truett, a former JPMorgan and PwC executive who joined Pebb Enterprises as director of investments in July 2014. “We were scaling up rapidly,” Truett said.

The accident called all of that into question. In the immediate aftermath, Truett and Wein sought to mitigate risk and ensure that Pebb Enterprises met its obligations to stakeholders such as retailers, contractors and banks. At the time of the crash, the

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In fact, we were able to successfully complete all developments under way at the time of the crash, and all but one of our tenant deliveries happened on time. That's remarkable, because, frankly it was an aggressive schedule to begin with."

Initially, Wein handled development, construction, asset management and corporate functions. Truett focused on issues related to lenders and ongoing transactions. "For the first couple of weeks after the crash, it was just about keeping the lights on," Truett said. "To be completely candid, I did not know what the future had in store for Pebb Enterprises." As the team spent long hours keeping the company afloat, emotions had to be put on hold. "We just put our heads down and did what needed to be done," Wein said.

As Truett sees it, relationships were the key to making it through this difficult time. Pebb received an outpouring of support from the industry, he remembers, and the employees were there for each other. The Weiner family, in particular, conveyed a strong sense of commitment to Pebb Enterprises and its employees, Truett says. "Bruce and Ian — the whole Weiner family — always treated Pebb as an extended family, and that's what kept us together," Truett said.

The Weiners might have chosen to sell the company, or at least to coast for a while. Instead, Ian Weiner stepped into the role of president and kept the firm on its aggressive growth track, Truett says. The company portfolio now comprises 19 properties across 11 states. New hires over the past year include Aaron Zucker, director of leasing, who joined from Phillips Edison & Co., and Eric Hochman, a former Kimco executive who is the firm's new director of development. "We have 21 employees now," Ian Weiner said. "So we actually have more employees now than we did a year ago." In

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The progress since the crash demonstrates the team's resilience, Truett says. "It is pretty amazing what we've accomplished and where we are today," he said. "We're aggressively in the market sourcing new deals that fit our investment criteria, all of which is a testament to Ian's continued vision and leadership and the trust that the Weiner family has placed in this business and the team." But of course, those who lost family, friends and colleagues continue to grieve. In November Ian Weiner took several days off to observe the anniversary of the event. "You see things like this on the news, but never in a million years do you think it will happen to you," he said. "And just the scale of it, too: seven employees in such a close-knit office. It has been difficult."

But the firm's progress has been a bright spot, Ian Weiner says, in part because all agree that it is exactly what Jared would have wanted. "He lived this business 24 hours a day," Ian Weiner said. "He would come in and say, 'Hey, I had this great idea in the shower last night, and I want to run it by you.' He was a great family man, and he was passionate about the family business."

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By Joel Groover SCT Magazine May, 2017
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