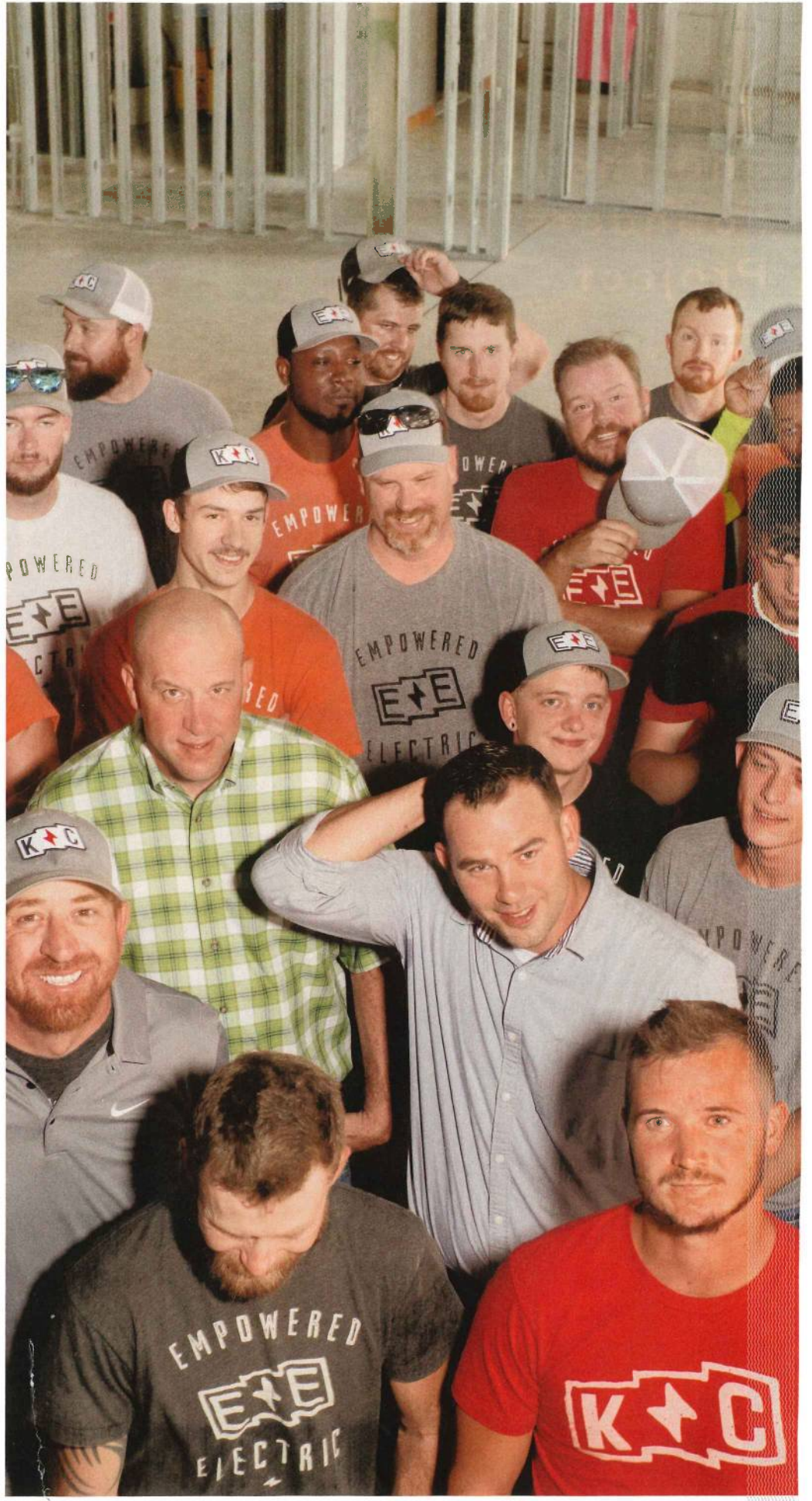


No. 210

Josh Levin

EMPOWERED ELECTRIC

Three-year growth 1,944% | 2018 revenue \$3.6M
North Kansas City, Missouri | Founded in 2015



HE POWERED HIS WAY THROUGH THE DARKNESS

Josh Levin was raised on the wrong side of the tracks. An unexpected call from his future mother-in-law—plus his own fierce determination—led him to start Empowered Electric, which has what's probably the coolest Instagram of any electrical contractor anywhere. —ASTOLD TO ZOË HENRY

My mom got pregnant with me when she was 16. I had multiple stepdads. They treated her poorly. She did the best she could, but she had to make decisions based on survival. The question wasn't, "Is this a caring, loving person?" but "Does he have a house, so we don't end up in a homeless shelter?"

Once, we ate pork rinds for a week, because we couldn't afford groceries. Another time, we fished in the pond out back to catch and eat the bluegills there—after our water got shut off.

I never felt safe or secure. No matter how well I did at school or in sports—and I made the varsity wrestling team—I still saw myself as the poor, dirty kid. To this day, that mentality is hard to change.

I became an electrician because of my childhood sweetheart, Bridget. When I was in my 20s, I knew I wanted to marry her. But I asked her father for his blessing, and he said, "No bloody way."

I needed to get a stable job. I started off answering phones at a pharmacy hotline. Then Bridget's mother called, asking me if I'd consider becoming an electrician, because she could help me get an interview. I put in my two weeks'

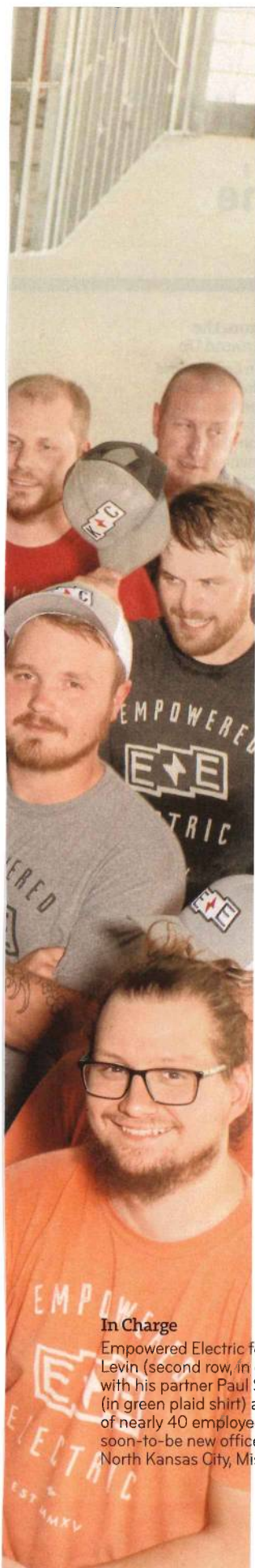
notice right then and there.

In my mind, an electrician was the closest real-life thing to a Power Ranger—the hard hat, and the tool belt. I had no experience, but I was crazy about the girl, and I was going to work my butt off.

When I started, I sucked. Bad. My first day, it took me two hours to put in three plugs. That is a *joke*. So I'd volunteer to work late in exchange for lessons in how to wire a transformer or repair light fixtures. By my second year at the company, I'd run my first job as foreman, on a sports complex for Fort Hays State University, in Hays, Kansas. By then, Bridget and I were married, and she had given birth to our first son.

But I didn't like the way that company treated its workers. We had very little vacation time—a week at the most—and I felt pressured by management not to take it. When Bridget went into labor with our second child, I had to decide whether I would be home for the labor or the actual birth. I decided to go to work that day, knowing our son might be born without me there. He wasn't, but Bridget will never let me live that one down.

People in construction talk about a



In Charge

Empowered Electric founder Josh Levin (second row, in gray shirt) with his partner Paul Shoemaker (in green plaid shirt) and some of nearly 40 employees at their soon-to-be new offices in North Kansas City, Missouri.

labor shortage, but I don't see it. It's not that Millennials don't know how to work hard, or that Generation Z would rather play video games than install a conduit. I learned firsthand that you don't have to have experience to become a great electrician. The real shortage is good construction companies.

So, in 2015, I launched Empowered Electric. By then, Bridget and I had four kids, and I had to make money from day one. I had a few jobs lined up from before, but mostly I knocked on businesses' doors and got laughed at. (I'm used to that. In high school, peers laughed at me because I was too poor to buy wrestling shoes—until a friend gave me an old pair, I wrestled in my socks.) Once, I showed up at the office of a general contractor and announced that I had one employee and been in business for three days—and they should hire me.

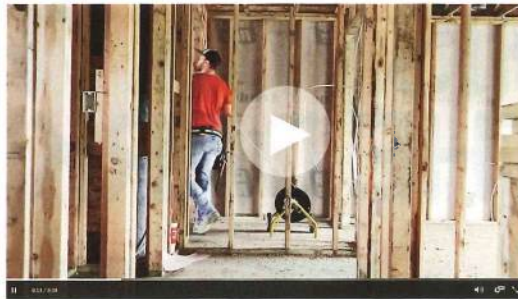
They said no. And I called the vice president every month for nine months. He finally asked us to wire a hair salon for just \$5,000. But, today, that contractor is one of our biggest customers.

The thought of running a typical commercial electric business my whole life honestly makes me want to puke. Most businesses are looking for highly skilled people who will work for low pay. I look for anyone with motivation. So I turned to Instagram.

It is laughable how construction companies underutilize social media. From the beginning, we hired a film crew to make badass (and shareable) ads for us with killer music. We showed dope restaurants with dudes running pipes, smiling and having a good time. Some job applicants would call us off the bat, but I also spent a lot of time analyzing who viewed our content, and cold-calling to see if they wanted to come on board. Our past 11 hires have been from Instagram or Facebook; about half of our staff was poached from social media.

Growing up the way I did, I know that for most kids ages 12 to 17, the biggest fear isn't prom or having unstylish shoes. It's employment. That's why I take chances on people with unusual backgrounds, and

No matter how well I did at school or in sports, I still saw myself as the poor, dirty kid.



From the Ground Up

An Empowered Electric staffer, seen in a still from one of the company's many online videos. Empowered Electric has more than 14,000 followers on Instagram.

spend a lot of money training them. We recently hired a chef. He's one of the best electrical apprentices I've seen in my life.

Sure, not every hire has been perfect. One time, our foreman on a big restaurant project just didn't show up, three days before the place was supposed to open. So I put on my tool belt and took over myself.

We work hard to retain our employees: We gave time off before we had official vacation policies. We bought counseling sessions for a worker struggling with his marriage. When we were just four people, someone's daughter had to be taken to the hospital, and he had to stay with her for several days. I dropped him off a check for the whole week—and left candy in his mailbox for the little girl.

Today, we have almost 40 employees. In 2018, we brought in \$3.6 million in revenue, and are on track to do at least \$7 million this year. I'm still prone to depression because of my childhood, and there have been a lot of dark nights. Part of me is constantly looking over my shoulder, thinking nothing good ever lasts. But I'm still going to wake up, get in the shower, put my freakin' jeans on, and get to work.

Bridget's father is finally proud of me. He even wants me to give him a job in the Empowered warehouse. Eventually, he'll get it, but not just yet.

He's gotta earn it.

