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**JUAN CARDONA:** "The biggest problem in our industry right now is contractors are not treating their employees well."

**SURVEY  
SAYS...  
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Air Conditioning Contractors of America, 2800 Shirlington Road, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22206 ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: JUAN CARDONA

President/Owner  
JC Heating and Cooling  
Cross Lanes, West Virginia



# Whiners Need Not Apply at JC Heating and Cooling

*JC Heating and Cooling, Cross Lanes, W.V., is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> year in business as a provider of exceptional HVAC service to the residential market in the Charleston metro area. Contractor Excellence caught up with its owner, Juan Cardona, to find out a little more about the challenges he faces in finding the right employees and running a business in a sparsely populated area.*

### You have an interesting history. Tell us a little about your background.

I was born in Cuba in 1958. Fidel Castro took over in 1959, at which time my parents applied to leave the country. Every family that applied for defection was assigned a number, and numbers were drawn in a lottery every week. If a family's number was drawn, they were allowed to leave. Our number was not drawn until 1971. We were actually losing hope of ever leaving. We ended up flying out of Cuba on the next-to-the-last flight, because the freedom flights were canceled after that. My family and I landed in Miami on June 21, 1971, not knowing any English. I was 13 years old when we left Cuba, but because of the language barrier, I had to repeat the seventh grade in Miami. I aced English through my junior high and high school years because I put all my effort into learning it. I nearly failed Spanish, though, because I was only focusing on English. I proudly became a U.S. citizen on Oct. 22, 1990.

### How did you get into the HVAC business?

In 1976, the Bryant air conditioning distributor in Miami had an opening for a warehouse man, and I applied for the job. I'll never forget the question that got me the job. One of the brothers who owned the business asked me



Juan Cardona was born in Cuba but found his way to West Virginia, where he started JC Heating and Cooling 20 years ago.

what size capacitor a three-phase unit needed. I just gave him a number, like a 55-microfarad capacitor. Little did I know that three-phase equipment doesn't have capacitors. It was a trick question. He didn't have any reaction, and he never told me if it was right or wrong. In the waiting room were three guys waiting to be interviewed, so I left, knowing there was no way I could get that job, because those guys coming in after me were more qualified.

A week later, I got a call letting me know

I got the job. Talk about being surprised! I asked why I got the job over others who were more qualified, and he said, "I asked the guys who came after you the same capacitor question. Of the four of you, you were the only one who gave me an answer. It was wrong, but you gave me an answer." I said, "So you're telling me you're hiring me on a wrong answer?"

And he said, "Yes. I'm not looking for a perfect person, I'm looking for someone who is willing to take risks. The other guys were afraid to



**FAR LEFT:** Lead installer, Billy Daff (left), discusses an upcoming job with Juan Cardona. **MIDDLE:** The core team at JC Heating and Cooling consists of (from left to right) Billy Daff – lead installer, Jennifer Morris – office manager, Juan Cardona – president/owner, and Eldon Blevins – lead technician. **IMMEDIATE LEFT:** Juan Cardona (right) believes that the HVAC industry is losing people because not all contractors are treating their employees well. **COVER AND FEATURE PHOTOS BY MIKE HALL OF PHOTO GRAFIX.**

## QUICK STATS

- Company Name:** JC Heating and Cooling
- Company Location:** Cross Lanes, West Virginia
- Number of Employees:** Five
- Years in Business:** 20
- ACCA Involvement:** Been a member for more than 15 years

say anything.” That taught me a lot early in life. It’s not what I know, it’s what I’m willing to do.

I moved up through the ranks there from parts to inside sales to technical training before they wanted to put me into sales. I wasn’t confident in my sales ability at that time, so I called Bryant to see if there were any other distributor positions available. They arranged an interview for me at Apex Supply Co., in Atlanta, and I got the job there in 1981. I met my wife in Atlanta in 1983, and when her office closed in 1985, we moved to West Virginia to be near her family.

### Why did you move from distribution to contracting?

I wanted to stay on the distribution side when we moved because that’s where I was comfortable, but there were no jobs to be had. I’m good on the technical side, so I thought I’d work for a contractor. I started working for a contractor, and my first few paychecks bounced. I ended up working for three different contractors. The last contractor was losing his business, and I tried to help him, but he wouldn’t let me. In 1989, I told him I was leaving to start my own business, and he said, “You’ll never make it in this area because you’re not one of us.” Those words have stayed with me to this day, but I didn’t let them affect me.

Instead, I got in my car and drove around town for a week, writing down addresses and names of those individuals I remembered. I came back home, and I made up a list of customers, and I sent them handwritten letters, letting them know I was branching out on my own and would love to

help them with their heating and cooling needs. At that time I had \$250 in my savings account, but those letters got my business rolling.

This year marks our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and it hasn’t always been easy. I live in a market that’s very sparse — only about 250,000 people — and any marketing I do has to be targeted right down to an address. It’s a tough market, and my growth has not been as much as I would like, but I have been profitable. In 2008, I did about 19 percent over what I did the previous year.

### How long have you been involved in ACCA?

I’ve been part of ACCA for over 15 years. I felt it was important to join because of the materials that ACCA provides. Most importantly, I like the interaction among the members. Unfortunately, we don’t have a local chapter in West Virginia, so it’s a little lonely here. I have tried to get a local group started, but it hasn’t worked out.

### How do you attract qualified people to come and work for you?

The biggest problem in our industry right now is contractors are not treating their employees well — meaning paying well and offering good benefits — and we’re losing employees as a result. I pay my people very well, although it’s difficult to find individuals who share my vision of the company. I often have to go outside the state to find people; in fact, the last guy I hired came from Cleveland. When I had three openings awhile back, I placed a display ad in the paper, rather than one in the want ad

section. The ad stated what I was looking for, as well as what I didn’t want. I said if you’re a drunk or a drug addict, don’t waste my time or yours because this is not the place for you. I also said I didn’t want any whiners at my company. I’m all about setting myself apart, and that ad worked great. I filled the positions within two weeks, and I even had customers calling me for service based on that ad.

### How do you like to spend your spare time?

I am very involved in my church, and I run a children’s ministry there for ages 3 to 12 years. Mainly what I do is mentor them. My message to them is that they have it made, they just don’t know it. They don’t realize the opportunities this country has given them and the value of being an American. That’s my message, and it keeps me really busy.

### What’s your favorite book?

Second to the Bible, I liked *Good to Great* by Jim Collins and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni. I’m also a member of Nexstar and the Comfort Institute, and they have a lot of books and materials that I like to read.

### Where do you like to go on vacation?

I love to visit Miami because my parents and immediate family are there. I love traveling in the U.S., and I just took my first trip out of the country this year. I took a cruise in the Mediterranean, so I was able to visit Barcelona. I love just being with friends and family. I don’t have to go far to have fun. 