

It's a family affair

SALLY KEENEY, Coorespondent

Many construction jobs are best learned as an apprentice to a master. It is no wonder such knowledge is passed down from generation to generation within families.

That has been the experience of homeowner Rebecca Rosenberg who has lived through two renovations in Virginia, one in New Hampshire and, most recently, one in Chapel Hill with the Will Johnson Building Co. and his family of sub-contractors.

"There does seem to be a family component to it," Rosenberg said. "But the experience here is exponential because every one of the workers is working with family or becomes like an adopted family to Will's family. I love 'em all."

Rosenberg and her husband have been working on building a house in Chapel Hill's Laurel Hill neighborhood for the past three years. She has a file cabinet full of home remodeling ideas she's been saving and adding to since 1970. They interviewed four architects and a couple of builders before deciding on a plan.







The couple planned on renovating a house on Laurel Ridge Road. When Johnson came to the site and looked at the shape of the house, however, he told them it would be less expensive to tear it down and build anew.

"My husband's reply was 'Sell it,' Rosenberg said. "I said, 'We're not doing that.'"

Johnson said, "I know an architect who can help you."



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Raleigh-based architect Rick Raynor worked with Johnson and the Rosenbergs to design a new house.

Johnson, his team of builders and extended family of subcontractors came to make the plans and dreams a reality. Johnson's wife, Laurie, is the human resources manager, marketing guru and chief financial officer. A 1980 Georgia Tech transplant from Atlanta whose parents retired here to be close to family, she is also the one who helps newly arrived homeowners connect with all of the essentials – doctors, accountants, pharmacies – all of the people you need to support you in today's busy world.

"Just seeing that my parents had to start over completely, their shopping, doctors, friends; I guess I am kind of the counselor/psychologist and help people integrate into Chapel Hill," Laurie said. "It is harder if people have retired here without having family here. I help our team understand why people may be feeling momentarily unhappy."

Son Ben, a recent Elon University graduate in business, is a project lead, house designer and maintains the company Web site (www.willjohnsonbuilding.com).

"I really liked us being a family business and enjoy the ups and downs and experiencing that as a family," Ben said. "I enjoy the good times and the hunkering down as a family and enduring slow times."

Ben's wife, Rebecca Shirey Johnson, another Elon graduate, is the purchasing director and helps homeowners choose everything from faucets to paint. She also acts as a liaison between the homeowner and the sub-contractors installing the products. The daughter of an Air Force family, Shirey Johnson got to travel to many European and Asian countries. She credits her travel experiences with giving her an advantage when people ask for a room to look like it has been inspired by the artists of China, France or Italy.

"I've traveled and lived in different countries," Shirey Johnson said. "I think it makes a difference in my ability to help our clients with their choices."

In addition to his family and in-house crews (Mike and his son, John; and Juan and his son, Cesar), Johnson says his company represents a team of families: Arnold Smith Grading — father and two sons; Freddie Partin Floor finishing — father and son; Precision Turfscape — father, wife and son; Custom Stone and Marble — father, two sons and a daughter in law; LD Swain & Son HVAC; and Hillsboro Plumbing — father and son-in-law.

Even the subs that don't represent a-family-working-together — Kevin Edwards, the electrician; Robert Laws, the plumber — are a part of the Will Johnson Building Co. family. They have all been working together for years.

"What becomes very exciting is, when doing a custom job, our clients starts to work within our 'family' and actually become a part of our family. It is a true collaboration of skills, ideas, ingenuity and creative energy that when complete – we all sort of step back and say, 'WOW this is really amazing!'"

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Another Johnson subcontractor that is a family business is Cabinet Creations, a Chatham County-based wood cabinet maker built on four generations of the Foushee family.

More than 30 years ago, when his sons were but a twinkle in his eye, Wayne Foushee bought some of the most modern European woodworking machines and tools available. He has been building beautiful cabinets for kitchens, libraries, great rooms and baths ever since. His sons have been watching since they were toddlers.

“As much as our customers are ready to be done and move in at the end of the project — there is always a sense of remorse that we will not be interacting when the job is complete,” Laurie Johnson said. “However, the good news is once you are in the “family” you always remain a part of our family — as our past clients will attest.”

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