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THE ONES TO WATCH: HOME BUILDING'S RISING STARS

by Anne Ladewig



The last few years have been difficult for many in the building industry. Many businesses closed their doors, and many talented people found pink slips instead of paychecks.

While some saw the downturn as a cue to pursue different career paths, others took a chance and dove in head first, either entering the industry during challenging economic circumstances, or seeking out ways to differentiate themselves from the competition.

The professionals profiled here have many things in common:

- They are leaders in their local home builders associations and other industry groups
- They seek out education and networking opportunities
- They are committed to learning and using new technology, both to improve their business practices and deliver a superior new home; and
- They are committed to the environment.

Above all, they share a passion for the industry and a commitment to excellent customer service.

Angela Harris, principal creative director and merchandiser, TRIO Environments

Tuxedo Park, N.Y.



Angela Harris, principal creative director and merchandiser for TRIO Environments, followed her passion and entered the building and merchandising industry in 1999. "Nothing makes me happier than knowing we have created an environment that buyers love," Harris said.

In 2008, she shifted her focus to emphasize sustainable design and merchandising. "I saw the

trend moving towards sustainable design," Harris said. "It's just a matter of time (because of government regulations) before it's not going to be a choice. I wanted to be ahead of the game."

Besides staying ahead of the curve, building sustainably gives Harris personal fulfillment. "I know we have created environments that are more sustainable and healthier for buyers and their families," she said. "I also feel great knowing I am taking my passion for design and doing my part to protect our natural resources."

Harris said her merchandising clients have seen an additional benefit to building sustainable models. "Sustainable building materials provide great storytelling points for the buyers," she said.

Harris said her favorite website is Pinterest, a social media platform for sharing images. "It provides an excellent resource for developers, builders, and merchandisers to really interact with consumers and gather real-time demographic information towards design trends," she said.

The TRIO Environments website includes recent "pins" and links to their Pinterest page. Harris and her team have used Pinterest to preview their new model homes and do presentations for clients.

Harris credits Rob Fleming, associate professor and co-founder of the Engineering and Design Institute at Philadelphia University, as one of her mentors.

Fleming, who met Harris when she came to the MS in Sustainable Design program at Philadelphia University in 2009, said that he found her to be a highly focused individual with a keen understanding that sustainability was going to be a major force that would reshape the design and construction industries. "She applied her high level of creativity, her deep understanding of business dynamics, and an endless supply of energy and enthusiasm to her work as a sustainable design student and it has clearly carried forward into some truly remarkable professional achievements," he said.

FUN FACT: If gender were not a factor, Harris would choose Brad Pitt to play her in a movie version of her life, because of his passion for architecture/design and his effort to build sustainable housing for the people of New Orleans.



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Tyler Jones, owner, Blue Heron Las Vegas



Tyler Jones, owner of Blue Heron in Las Vegas, carried on a family legacy when he entered the industry in 2000. Today, his father Steve Jones is his business partner. "My background is architecture and design," Tyler Jones said. "I brought in his (Steve Jones) experience, combined it with my new ideas, and created Blue Heron."

During the past year, Blue Heron opened a private design/build custom home division and began building custom homes in several new communities throughout the Las Vegas Valley. "It's a pretty big shift," Jones said. "We were operating as a builder/developer. As the market changed drastically here, we were building through that and paying back loans."

Jones said Blue Heron attracted a lot of clients who wanted to build on their own lots. "Today half our business is outside our communities," he said. "We can build more homes without taking on additional debt."

"Our company truly integrates architecture, interior design, and general contracting services," he said. This complete control made it easy to transition to multiple projects in different neighborhoods. "We can apply our resources in our projects throughout Las Vegas and provide the same level of service," he said.

"We have zero debt right now because of this strategy, which is very comforting in this day and age," Jones said.

This year, Blue Heron is building the 2013 New American Home in Las Vegas, the showpiece of the International

Builders' Show. This is the second time for the company to build the New American Home.

He said the best part of the project is the new technology being brought in, and the process of sifting through it and incorporating as much as possible. Of course, there is an additional benefit. "We take everything we learn and immediately apply it to our other projects," he said.

Jones said Blue Heron is known as the authority on green building in Las Vegas. "Clients tell us they're interested in sustainability; they want energy efficiency," he said. "We offer the choices and get to know them and what they want to do."

"We're going to have our best year on record this year coming through the struggle in Las Vegas, and it's exciting to be building, expanding and growing," Jones said. "In a market that's perceived as difficult, we're making it work and are very proud of that."

FUN FACT: Jones went canoeing, camping and fishing in the interior of Peru near the origin of the Amazon River this past year.

Quint Lears, CSP, director, New Homes Division, Steinborn and Associates Real Estate Las Cruces, N.M.



Quint Lears, CSP, is the director of the new homes division of Steinborn and Associates Real Estate. He is also a new home salesperson for Hakes Brothers Construction in Las Cruces, N.M.

Lears entered the building industry in 2004, combining his interest in real estate and enjoyment

of sales. "The field of sales is really unique," he said. "In a field where service and leadership equals success, I'm able to be a servant and a leader."

"I love presenting the product and the excitement of making a sale," Lears said. "When you're out there, people are counting on you to make things happen, and I thrive in a competitive environment."

Lears said he also enjoys working in a field that has such a tremendous effect on the economy. "If you're in real estate, people are asking you, 'How's the market?'" He said. "Real estate affects everything, and the salesperson is the tip of the spear."

As further recognition that Lears is not just surviving, but thriving, he won the 2012 Nationals Gold Award for Salesperson of the Year.

"A lot of people are really proud of me in my hometown," Lears said. "It makes us feel like we can compete at a national level."

Beyond winning the award, Lears said he benefited just by going to The Nationals Awards Gala. "It was a really awesome experience to meet talented people from all over the country," he said. "To get out of a small town and see what people are doing is a real benefit."

Lears has taken coursework through NAHB's Institute of Residential Marketing, achieving the Certified New Home Salesperson (CSP) designation, and completing all of the coursework for the Certified New Home Marketing Professional (CMP) designation.

Lears said he has learned a lot through the coursework. "I've learned how to present a home and qualify buyers," he said. "I've learned to think differently. Going through these classes raises my thinking to a higher level. I really understand how to make suggestions to my builder and take on more of a leading role in the company."

FUN FACT: Lears is a veteran of the United States Air Force and said, "Family Ties"-era Michael J. Fox would play him in a movie about his life, because "[his character] was business oriented, but had a good sense of humor and made people laugh."

Jeremy Martin, GMB, CGP, CGB, co-owner/principal, RisherMartin Fine Homes
Austin, Texas



Jeremy Martin, GMB, CGP, CGB, along with his business partner, Chris Risher, launched RisherMartin Fine Homes, a renovation company, in January 2010. The partners met while attending the University of Texas at Austin. Martin earning an engineering degree and Risher a finance degree.

In the midst of a housing market downturn, the two saw an opportunity in their market, and kept in mind that many great companies, including HP, started in recessions. "If we could make it in 2010, we could make it any time," Martin said.

Martin said there were some advantages to starting a remodeling company at that time. "We've hired good people who were available," he said.

The partners also use their education history, which many might not think would lead to careers in remodeling, as an asset. Their backgrounds in engineering and finance lead professionals in those fields to hire them to renovate their homes.

"Most of our customers have similar backgrounds, so it's easier to find common ground in the sales process," Martin said. "It gives them a certain amount of comfort."

Another way the RisherMartin team relates to its clientele in Texas's technology capital, Austin, is that they are 100 percent paperless. "Our team loves it, our clients respond to it," Martin said. "It is a huge advantage for us. Clearly sets us apart in our market and in our industry."

Martin serves as chairman of the Austin Area Remodelers Council and is a member of the board of directors for



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**Cindy Cepko, CSP, MCSP, MIRM, CGP, Forest Homes of Lake Wallenpaupack
Paupack, Penn.**

Entered the industry in 2003

Opened a rental company to fill a void in her lakeside community, as well as fill the sales funnel for future new home sales.

FUN FACT: Lake Wallenpaupack was featured as a retreat location in the popular TV show "The Office" in the eleventh episode of the second season, "Booze Cruise."



James Rudo, CGB, president, VictoryGate Custom Homes, LLC

North Canton, Ohio

Entered the industry in 2005

Combines custom with production to give buyers their dream homes as quickly as possible.

FUN FACT: Home building is a family affair in many companies, but it works slightly differently for Rudo at VictoryGate. "My dad works for us now as a supervisor," Rudo said. "He's the best source of eyes and ears we have!"



Jason August, CSP, CMP, president, North Star Synergies/Gourmet Real Estate, Inc.

Centennial, Colo.

Entered the industry in 1992, cleaning up for the local parade of homes

Uses his international experience to market and sell to different cultures and interact with people at different levels.

FUN FACT: Jason August has had the fewest birthdays of anyone we interviewed. He was born on Leap Day, February 29.



Kristin Savard, owner and president, Advanced Design Group Professional Engineering and Surveying, PC

Lewiston, N.Y.

Entered industry in 1995/started own company in 2005

Her entrepreneurial spirit and belief that anything is possible sets her apart from the competition.

FUN FACT: When her company redesigned their office space, they dedicated 700 square feet of space for children of employees to watch TV, do homework and play. To add an extra convenience, the school bus stops in front of the office to pick up and drop off children.

the Home Builders Association of Greater Austin. He got involved to gain leadership skills. "When you're young (as Martin is at 36), when you walk in somebody's house, your youth is not seen as an asset."

Martin added to his education, earning the Graduate Master Builder (GMB), Certified Green Professional (CGP), and Certified Graduate Builder (CGB) designations from NAHB. "The best part of getting the designations is the interaction with peers and the instructors," he said. "I remember leaving all the classes thinking, 'Wow, I'm glad I came to that.'"

"We've had quite a bit of success and our company is growing rapidly," Martin said. Their success has been recognized with industry accolades: They were named the 2011 Texas Remodeler of the Year and the NAHB Remodeler of the Month for June 2012.

FUN FACT: Martin said he would choose Matt Damon to play him in a movie about his life. "First, my wife loves the guy, so she would be thrilled," he said. "He's confident, capable, seems a little unassuming, but still able to crack a couple heads if he has to – to get the job done."

Damian Story, sales counselor, Ryland Homes *Denver*



Damian Story, sales counselor at Ryland Homes, entered the building industry in 2005 because of his passion for building relationships while working with people, and a passion for the environment.

"As an industry, we keep getting better with knowledge which translates to a better built product," Story said. "We

provide the results in plain sight through the HERS (home energy rating) index, livability, and cost savings. This is truly an engineered process that is measured early and often, and continues to evolve in the market today."

Story said he uses the sustainability of the new homes in his community to start a conversation with the buyer. "People like how 'good for the environment' feels," he said. "We showcase cork countertops, reclaimed floors, and low VOC (volatile organic compound) paint."

Story said he goes beyond the provided information and product training to learn how the sustainable materials will benefit the buyer. "I'm pretty passionate that knowledge is power," he said.

Story said he tries to emulate the great customer service of retail brands such as Costco and Nordstrom. "I think when people come in to buy we should make it easy," he said. "My best close is when somebody comes in, I ask them, 'What is it going to take for you to buy this home?' and they say, 'We don't know.' I tell them to come back tomorrow. I give them a free pass. We get caught up with putting the pressure on and they don't have the mental clarity to make a major decision. I've sold more houses by that approach."

Story prides himself on his service throughout the process of buying a home. "There's no need to make a phone call to somebody else; I figure it out," he said.

Ultimately, Story said he credits his balanced life with his success as a salesperson. "At 5:30 a.m., I get up and work out. I run hard, exercise, and then when I go in to work, I'm at my best and I'm ready to take on anything," he said. "People can feel my excitement, passion and energy."

"You can take any salesperson and give them all the training in the world. The difference comes down to what do they believe, how do they take care of themselves, how do they treat people," he said. "Those are the ones that have room for growth and can be excellent at selling."

FUN FACT: Story traded the bright lights of Hollywood for the sales floor. See his IMDB page here: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1576227/> *SMI*