

The FEMININE advantage

by MARILEE SPANJIAN



Building contractor Winna McLeod walks through a home she built with her husband, Chris, in the Cherry Grove neighborhood in Spring Hill. "I love the framing stage. I love the smell of wood," she said. "It's where you can shape a house and put your own personal touch on it."

Buyers and colleagues say women builders bring attention to detail to the job site

SPRING HILL – It's not unusual to find women selling new homes or selecting the interior finishes. But despite well-known women builders (like the one on the right-hand side of this page), it still is less common that you would expect to find a woman builder on the job site.

Winna McLeod is used to the double takes she gets, and Cathy Calvin and Lisa Cole are quickly getting used to it. After all, up until they came along, the booming city of Spring Hill had been built primarily by a group of independent male contractors.

Currently, these three are the only women of the 63 builders who pulled permits on both the Williamson and Maury county sides of Spring Hill.

While their presence represents less than 5% - in line with the national average - they are perhaps just another sign of change.

Home buyers see difference

Developer Donnie Cameron, who developed Cameron Farms, McLemore Farms and Cherry Grove where both McLeod and Cole build, says women builders have a huge advantage over men in the construction business because they pay more attention to detail. That pays off, he adds, "because really, women are the one who by the houses and men just pay for them... Women builders take more time. They're more attentive. These women are out there on the job sites every day."

Williamson County juvenile court judge Robbie Beal and his wife, Heather, searched for a home for two years "off and on," Robbie said, limiting themselves to Franklin and Brentwood until they went to visit friends in Spring Hill and fell in love with the small-town family feel.

After driving around, they found Cherry Grove and walked into a home built by Winna McLeod and her husband, Chris. Immediately, they noticed extras in the house. "Honestly, I never thought about buying from a women builder. But we noticed that they listened to what we wanted," Robbie said.

“For example, we mentioned that we like to collect art. We never requested it, but they built extra alcoves for us. They just picked up on it. Chris is a perfectionist and so is Winna...When we did our walk-through, they both had already gone through and made their own punch lists. I don’t remember one thing that we found.”

As Chris functions as the building and quality control supervisor on the 15 homes currently under construction, Winna works with the various floor plans on CAD to figure out how to add details like shower seats and art niches and personality like arches to enclose a spa tub.

“I love the framing stage, I love the smell of wood,” she said. It’s where you can shape a house and put your own personal touch on it.”

She also works with the homebuyers, listening and answering questions.

“Winna’s the brains,” Chris said, as she also handles all the paperwork with the help of her mother and sister, who maintains their Web site – www.mcleodcutomebuilders.com - in the office.

Feminine: Buyers say women builders bring attention to detail

Like Winna McLeod, Lisa Cole find details set her homes apart from others on the market. You’ll find lots of arched doorways, tray ceilings, sitting areas off the master bedrooms, more closet space and leaded glass front doors.

A man’s world

Accepted by the buyers, are they accepted by their subcontractors, suppliers and male peers, or is there a resistance to their presence? All three women agree that most aren’t rude or condescending, perhaps because they soon realize that these women sign their paychecks. And a check is a check.

Unlike studies conducted by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and Chicago Women in Trades, where 41% of the female construction trade workers suffered from gender harassment, 88% reported sexual harassment, and more than half of those surveyed reported that men refused to work with them, these three women are succeeding. Again, they’re writing the checks.

And not one of these women started out in the construction business. For years, Winna McLeod had been a jewelry buyer for Service Merchandise while her husband, Chris, ran his HVAC and electrical subcontracting business. But after leaving the working world to raise her second of three daughters (ages 12, 14, and 20), she was encouraged by her husband to get her contractor’s license in 1995.

“He told me that I knew more than I thought,” she recalled. “It’s the best thing that ever happened.”

In 2003, McLeod custom Builders built 27 homes in Cherry Grove, Campbell Station and McLemore Farms with an average price of \$250,000.



Building contractor Lisa Cole walks through a home she is building in the Cherry Grove neighborhood in Spring Hill.

Like Winna McLeod, Lisa Cole of Living Homes Inc. didn't set out to become a builder. At 32 years old, she graduated from a North Carolina college with a computer degree and moved with her husband, Dan, a sound engineer in the music industry, to Tennessee.

After 10 years working in the corporate world managing \$5 to \$6 million computer projects she and her husband decided to build their own home in the country to see if she liked the business.

"I was surprised to find I didn't have more trouble being a women," she said. Perhaps it helps to have a father-in-law who's a building inspector to show her the ropes.

That one experience, though, sold her on making a career change. Instead of wearing traditional business clothes, you're more likely to find Cole wearing mud-caked work boots, a baggy fleece, jeans and her megawatt smile. While her laptop is always within reach behind her front seat, the floor of her truck is cluttered with boxes of doorknobs and spare tools.

Already, she has sold one house and has a 2,260 square-foot home priced at \$184,900 ready to move in and two more – a 2,398-square-foot one-story and a 2,665-square-foot two-story, both priced at \$264,900 – almost completed.



Building Contractor Cathy Calvin walks through a home she is building at the Hunter's Pointe, a 5-year-old community off Kedron Road on the Maury County side of Spring Hill. "I'm very visual," says Calvin

Midlife career change

After years working in interior design and sales, Cathy Calvin got hooked on building while renovating a historic Victorian. That experience, plus having Gary Clinton of Southern Accent Homes as a mentor, gave this Nolensville resident the confidence to get her contractor's license last May and start building spec homes.

But that was easier said than done. Calvin found it difficult to find a bank and a developer willing to take a chance on a new builder. Mack Allen at Community South Bank in Spring Hill believed in her, she said. So did developer Roger Moore, who sold her a half-acre lot in Hunter's Pointe, a 5-year-old community off Kedron Road on the Maury Country side of Spring Hill.

There, her 2,175-square-foot three-bedroom, two-bath home with a two-car garage that was listed for \$189,900 went under contract last week.

While it may look like the other brick homes in the community, Calvin has peppered the inside with details not normally found in spec construction.

"I'm very visual," said the divorced mother of three as she pointed out different stains she's using for the cabinets, a unique vent hood in the kitchen and the stucco stenciling she made to create intricate crown molding to accent the formal rooms.

More subtle details can be found throughout, such as the way she tucks the electrical outlets into the baseboards to de-clutter the walls. There's a shower seat in the master bath, a larger laundry room, and outside, the sidewalk flares where it connects to the aggregate driveway.

"I'm looking to build three to four more homes each year, and I hope to build in Williamson County," she added.

To learn more, here who to call

For McLeod Custom Builders homes, call realtor Adrienne Arnett at (615) 429-5193

For builder Lisa Cole of Living Homes Inc., call (615) 566-8182.

For builder Cathy Calvin at (615) 456-3361.