

Local women builders say quality, care are hallmarks of their homes

BY PAM HORNE



Kris Chapman stands in front of one of the homes she has built.

Kris Chapman, Lisa Cole, Debra Smith and Marilee Spanjian met recently for the first time.

They are independent, businesswomen who share the same profession, yet had never exchanged ideas about their life's work.

Within a few short minutes, they connected over coffee at J. Christophers in Cool Springs.

There are more than 15,000 women across America building homes, according to the National Homebuilders Association, and these four have chosen Williamson County to execute their craft.

Examples of their custom dwellings stretch from the northern boundaries of this community to its southernmost city.

The public has been conditioned by-and-large to expect a man to the job these women perform day in and day out, but they believe the quality of their products speak for themselves.

"I named my company DLS construction years ago because I didn't want anyone to know I was a woman." Says Smith, who is currently building in the Reserve at Temple Hills, Her homes now start at \$800,000.

"I wanted them to see the house before they knew it was a women builder."

Spanjian, who has built homes in Cherry Grove and is now beginning her first in Franklin's Watkins Creek, says she was drawn to the business several years after successfully overseeing additional and makeover projects in her own home.

Spanjian, owner of Tapestry Builders, says the details are usually what separate how a male and female create the house.

"When people walk in my houses they always comment that there is just something about it that seems more logical, more livable," she adds.

Chapman, who is also currently building in Watkins Creek with Chapman and Chapman Builders, is a former nurse and early on in her building career was a self-described fixer upper. Now her homes are in the \$750,000 range.

She attributes her design details to knowing how a woman approaches life's most routine tasks.

"I want to be able to walk in with my mail and know exactly where it goes and the same with my groceries."

The goal, Chapman says, is to create a footprint that makes a home user-friendly. That may be achieved by reducing the number of steps from the garage door to the pantry or by providing a coffee nook in the master suite.

For example, Chapman and Cole both point out that the width of most staircases is usually inadequate when it comes to moving large pieces of furniture to the second floor.

So in their homes you'll have more than enough depth and width to accommodate that large sofa or bed.



Lisa Cole (above) and Debra Smith proudly show off their homes.

Cole, owner of Living Homes Incorporated, has just completed building three estate homes on five acre-tracts off Byrd Lane in Bethesda.

She offers simple features like a pot filler faucet at the stovetop in the kitchen to prevent the cook from having to move heavy pots back and forth from the sink to the burner.

Placing air vents flush with the floor in the same natural hardwood of the room instead of using metal prefab vents is a much more aesthetically appealing, Cole says, and doesn't add much to the cost.

She believes in a large finished garage with extra square footage in the basement so more living space can be added down the road.

All four builders share a commitment to one philosophy they say is non-negotiable when setting out a new project.

Their presence at the property during construction is a daily commitment they make to their clients.

Smith says she makes it a priority to be in a home a minimum of three hours a day, overseeing the work of subcontractors.

“You will have a subcontractor that works for five different builders,” Smith notes. “You will get five different stages of work from that subcontractor. It all depends on the quality of work that the builder expects from that subcontractor.”

Spanjian echoes Smith adding that in order to ensure superior quality a hands-on approach is essential and communication is vital. “This is not delegation, You have to be there.”

For that reason, each one of these builders has chosen to create fewer homes in a given year, passing up the opportunity to build more even when the market was at its peak.

“For me, these homes become like my babies when I sell them I feel like I’m putting them up for adoption,” Spanjian explains.

And in order to make it in the business, they all agree that strong communication and interpersonal skills with a mostly male workforce is critical.

“I was a caregiver (before going into homebuilding),” Chapman shares. “I think that has helped me more when dealing with guys. I treat them as human beings and try to make them feel appreciated. People skills go a long way in this business.”

Smith has taken the approach that to ensure quality she must put herself in her clients’ shoes.

“I build every home as though I’m going to live in it,” Smith insists. With that level of expectation, she has been successful in her craft.

She is most proud of having built personal homes for more than one engineer during her career.

We finished our interview by talking about the lessons they all have learned over the years. Their responses are telling.

Smith says without hesitation: “listen to the client carefully.”

Cole adds that she’s learned to “trust my gut” on decisions.

“Check it yourself,” emphasizes Chapman.

And, Spanjian adds that she’s learned you have to “stand on your own two feet.”

“When things were really selling quickly, I had subs encouraging me to increase the number of homes I was building, but I didn’t get into this to stamp out houses,” Spanjian remarks, adding that the difference women bring to the table is the ability to see the home from many angles. Ultimately, she says, it is quality, liability and the character of the property that establishes your reputation in this highly competitive business.