



## A study in perfection

Malcolm Gladwell, the award-winning author of “The Outliers” a chronicle of modern day success that stayed on the New York Times best sellers list for many months, theorised that a person or group’s success was the result of 10,000 hours of practice.

If that’s the case then this year’s winner of the Northumberland Central Chamber of Commerces’ Award of Excellence - Al Rose, of Stalwood Homes, certainly fits Gladwell’s criteria. *Business Times* sat down shortly after the award ceremony, with Al Rose, to discover the reason for the award and very quickly learned it was a combination of teamwork, quality, vision and follow-through and attention to every detail of every facet of the business of home-building.

The credo of the Company came through in almost the first few minutes of talking with Al, “we pride ourselves in being friends of the client! The clients we have, they trust us to do the job.” But getting to this point, sitting in a palatial model home in the newest development, took twice the ten thousand hours of practice that Gladwell observes. Going from a two person firm framing houses for other contractors to the, now flourishing, Family business, employing ten full-time people, it is today, took time and lots of effort.

After leaving school, having grown up on the family farm, that his father - a prominent Cobourg doctor - owned, he left for the West Coast and California. Returning to pick up employment in the early 80s, he was driving a truck for a local concrete company, when he decided that he needed to do something else when the block company was bought by a faceless conglomerate. Always the handy guy, farm trained, he started work with a local contractor renovating kitchens and working at other small jobs. This led him to hook-up with James Hoffman, who was developing the condos at the Cobourg Harbour. This ‘on the job training’ led him to learn all aspects of the construction trades. As the Hoffman development wound down he went to Toronto for a year and worked with a framing crew at a fast and furious pace, as Al recalls, “I learned how to do it [work construction and frame houses on renovation jobs] fast and well!”



A fourplex in Cobourg, one of Stalwood's first projects

Coming back to Cobourg he partnered with Steve McKirdy who was building homes in the area and he bought Steve out in 1996 and Stalwood Homes was his. This new company did everything from being a framing crew to renovations. Buying land and building houses, as well as doing anything that came up - big or small, was the modus operandi. Whether it was a fourplex on a small infill lot, (at least three of these in Cobourg), or a custom home on a larger lot he was doing it all. With his wife Chris doing the books and paperwork, Al and his crew was left to develop a reputation. "Our business is built on client referrals and we work hard to gain the customer's trust." Al states proudly.

Still learning on the job, he found that he had to problem solve along the way and face different challenges. The one challenge Al spoke about when asked "What was your most memorable job?" was how to weather a recession while the job collapses in front of you. Explaining this he used the example of a job he was doing when he was renovating a large house in the Country when he hit an Indian burial ground during normal excavation work. This job was being done at the beginning of one of the last recessions: the owner of the house lost his high-paying job and the bank withdrew financing. "The legalities of dealing with the burial ground took six months and we almost were out of business. The choice at that time was to put more money into the project or walk from the money we had in the job." Al recalled. "We decided to finish the job, sell the house and pay back the local people who lent us the money to finish. That experience paid off for us as it cemented our reputation as we gradually paid off the debt." Another example of the problem solving that Al does is the time that when he was building a cluster of homes, in the Forest Hills area. The wells on two of the lots failed to come up to the standards required. So he ended up designing a communal well consisting of individual pumps to each house from a community cistern fed by a good well. "You do what you have to do to finish the job." he says casually. This "can-do" attitude prevails in all of his actions and conversations. When asked about his most difficult job he is hesitant to name one but did say, "We have overcome most of the problems as we went along. Some jobs led to a few sleepless nights. We are not scared of much these days"

Today the Company will take on any job that pays. Some people were surprised that in the latest recession a couple of years ago Stalwood Homes advertised for renovation jobs.



The Fitzhugh development, East end of Cobourg

Whilst picking up small jobs Al is also not scared of developing raw land. The cluster of homes at the East end of Cobourg Fitzhugh Estates, at King St. And Wilmot St. is a good example of raw land to finished homes. The row of condos, six units in each building as well as single family dwellings were all a Stalwood development. Stalwood has built over two hundred and fifty housing units since they started and each one has been different. In all of the developments the successful component has been the targeted marketing. "As we move into a new phase we sit down and ask ourselves who will be the buyers. Each development is geared to the demographic that will purchase it." Al explains. "For instance in the New Amherst development we were selling to mature people on their last house, this new development in Precious Corners will be geared to younger families looking to move from their starter homes." To date Al and his crew, and he always is giving credit to his employees and teammates, have developed distinctive and different home sites. New Amherst was part of an urbanised planned community in the "New Urbanism" mode. The 'Orchard Gate' subdivision in Brighton follows a traditional urban style of subdivision and the newest tract - 'Cedar Creek' located in the Southern part of Hamilton Township at precious Corners on the Dale Rd is an estate home style on bigger lots.



One of the custom homes built by Stalwood Homes

The most impressive homes have been the custom homes design- built in a collaborative relationship between the Company and the client. Looking at the Stalwood Homes website (<http://www.stalwoodhomes.ca/>) one can only gape in awe at the size, scope and complexity of these quality homes.

To expand and complement the relationship between the builder and the client Stalwood Homes is in the process of establishing a corporate headquarters. Realising the need to consolidate

head office functions and also have a home design centre where clients can see and sniff the samples of interior outfitting as well as discuss a range of floor plans in comfort Al has purchased and renovated a large building which was once home to an auto parts warehouse. "Having secured two tenants and with the possibility of a third the available space will make the building self-sustaining and allow the Company to have the space needed for itself. The time was right, we were in a trailer at New Amherst and that project has ended, we needed space for ourselves and we are proud of the job we have done to renovate and upgrade this building, that sits inside the Heritage District. It's a good fit, the Heritage Committee should be proud." Al tells *Business Times*.

When asked about future plans Al does not hesitate to say, "More of what we are doing now, expand a bit and still provide quality to our clients." The subject of quality leads Al to explain that a large part of the business is Customer Service. "We have a whole department devoted to after service and client happiness, and it pays off in the more business through referrals." Always on the look out for good value land bases and lots he is ever mindful of the way to keep housing costs down, that is by not paying high land values and he is still looking for another tract in Cobourg. But however Al Rose runs Stalwood Homes whether it is by paying respect to his impressive team of employees, winning prestigious awards or being mindful of clients concerns, or by continuing to sponsor local sports program sa n d c o m m u n i t y endeavours you can be sure that not much will change from his present winning formula. Malcolm Gladwell should have had this guy in his book - he has more than ten thousand hours practice under his belt!



The stairway of success!

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