

W.B. Homes: Breaking Ground On Another 25 Years



After a quarter of a century building homes in the Greater Philadelphia area, North Wales-based homebuilder W.B. Homes is happily ringing in the occasion with a new transit-oriented development (TOD) in the Borough of Lansdale. The second TOD W.B. has built in the past three years; the Townhomes at Cannon Square is the ideal development to launch the company into its next 25 years, revealing volumes about where the company has been and, more importantly, where it is going.

“To say it was a humble beginning would be an understatement,” says President and Founder Bill Bonenberger, who began W.B. Homes in 1986 after several years with a national home builder following his education at the Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades in Media, Pennsylvania. Bill and his wife Janet headquartered the young company out of the 700 sq. ft. duplex they called home. As in any good office, subcontractors and vendors were greeted at the entryway by a

friendly face – in this case, that of the couple’s Golden Retriever, Shane. Of course there were casualties in those early days, mainly the shoes of subs and vendors which Shane snacked on while Bill forged long-lasting business partnerships; however, for many of the companies that are still working with W.B. after 25 years, the loss of a shoe (or 2, or 3) was well worth it. That feeling seems to be contagious, as many of W.B.’s employees, subcontractors, and suppliers have been with the company for over a decade.

The early years established what W.B. Homes still considers to be one of its most vital missions: to make homebuilding a personal process. The achievement of this goal begins when W.B. purchases ground for a new development. “We’re not just looking for a place to build houses, we are looking for a location where people can build their lives,” explains Chris Canavan, Director of Land Acquisition and Development, who offers up Cannon Square as an example. “These townhomes are in walking distance to restaurants, shops, coffee shops, churches, and public transportation”. “We want our buyers to experience community face-to-face, not through their car windows,” adds Canavan. The process gets more personal once buyers begin designing their homes. As he did when he joined the company 18 years ago, Vice President Jack Boyd meets with every single-family homebuyer with the goal of delivering to them the exact home they want, with all the customizing they desire, on the lot that best fits their lifestyle. “I ask a ton of questions,” says Boyd. “By the end of the meeting, I know where they want the sun in the morning, if they’ll be putting in a pool, their feelings on walk-out basements, and much more.” That’s how we get our families in the right homes,” he says. Boyd goes on to say

“the single most important thing to us is that our customers get the exact home they dreamed of and don’t have to settle for something close because we didn’t have the imagination or dedication to see their dream”.

This level of customization, an inclination that comes naturally to Bonenberger and Boyd, has set W.B. Homes apart from the competition from the late 1980’s when the company broke ground on its first development, Gwynedd Meadows, a 10-lot subdivision in Upper Gwynedd Township. For the first decade, W.B. focused on building large single-family homes, which allowed for an impressive level of customization. “Many of our competitors either couldn’t or wouldn’t entertain high levels of customizing because it is extremely difficult to control both cost and quality when no two homes are alike,” says Bonenberger; however, building custom homes was instinctual for the builder. “I could never buy a one-size-fits-all house so I assume that given the option, our buyers wouldn’t want to either,” he says.

Ten years of building complex, custom homes established W.B. as a responsible, quality builder trusted not only by homebuyers, but also by local realtors, vendors and subcontractors. “We know we only have one reputation and we wanted to make sure it reflected the values that Janet and I believe in,” says Bonenberger. Its excellent standing in the Montgomery and Bucks County areas allowed the company to expand into townhomes and 55+ communities, two ventures that helped the company cater to the wide and varied needs of its customers. Despite the limitations on customization presented by attached housing developments, W.B. was determined to apply the same personal approach used on single-family communities. To address this issue, W. B. Homes designs all of their

townhome and 55+ product lines with as many pre-designed, pre-priced, and pre-engineered structural options as possible. For example, options like a sunroom, owner's bedroom sitting room, additional bedrooms and baths, third floor loft, covered porches or patios, and finished basements with wet bars are all items available in most attached home communities.

“The structural options are just the start of it,” says Bonenberger. “Our typical option manual for any of our projects is more than 50 pages.” Applying the same WB personal approach to their townhome and 55+ communities over the last 15 years has paid off. In both 2009 and 2010 W.B. built more homes in Montgomery County in the \$300 to \$400 thousand dollar range than any other builder—local, regional, or national; that according to the Hanley Wood Marketing Intelligence Group that monitors new construction in the top metropolitan areas around the country. “The addition of our townhome and active adult product lines has allowed us to cater to multiple generations of the same family, as well as to allow our buyers to become repeat customers as their lifestyle and needs change,” says CFO Dave King. “There is nothing more satisfying for us than when parents living in one of our single family communities bring their adult children to one of our townhome communities, or when young adults in our townhomes bring their parents to purchase in one of our active adult communities,” King continues.

When glancing through a W.B. option manual, buyers may notice some options missing—because at W.B., many features considered “upgrades” by other builders come *standard* in a W.B. home. Bonenberger, who learned to build houses from the ground up as a trained bricklayer, believes that buyers should not have to

pay extra for quality; value should come standard. Even in the face of a dismal housing market, W.B. maintained a strong commitment to its core beliefs; a choice that customers have recognized, allowing W.B. to continue to provide for homebuyers despite the worst recession in recent memory.

W.B. Homes contributes its continued success in part to its relationship with Coldwell Banker Premier Properties. The Coldwell sales team, built by David Caracausa and Marco Tustanowsky, accompanies buyers on every step of the purchasing process. From the initial visit to a sample home to the ceremonial handing over of the keys, Coldwell's sales team offers professional support and direction. For those with homes to sell, Caracausa and Tustanowsky have developed creative programs that mitigate the anxiety of selling and provide for a seamless transition to their new W.B. home. "It's a great partnership because our people value the same things," says Bonenberger. "Plus, we've grown up in this business together. We've been through multiple recessions together so we've experienced both the good, and the bad, but mostly we've enjoyed the good."

Both companies hope to continue this trend as W.B. begins to navigate the road towards its 50th anniversary. Certainly, the Townhomes at Cannon Square have the company on the right track. Participating in Lansdale's rehabilitation, offering homes perfectly sized for W.B.'s wide range of customers (from newlyweds to empty nesters), and embracing a green approach to development with TODs, W.B. Homes wants to continue to serve its customers long into the future and continue to exemplify its mission: "Building Neighborhoods One Home at a Time."

Help W.B. Homes celebrate its 25th Anniversary by checking out their brand new website at www.wbhomesinc.com, their newest townhome community with three fully decorated model homes (The Villages at Country View), and their upcoming communities of Cannon Square in Lansdale, and Thorndale in Towamencin Township. Exciting things are happening at W. B. Homes—be part of it!