

TOM, JIM, FRAN AND STEVE KEATING, JAMES KEATING CONSTRUCTION LTD.

James Keating Construction Ltd. celebrates 60 years of building custom homes

BY JAIME MYSLIK

ELORA – A personable experience, after-sale service, local sub-trade contractors, quality custom homes. That's what James (Jim) Keating, 80, set out to provide when he began James Keating Construction Ltd. 60 years ago - and that's what his sons are striving to achieve with the business today.

Keating Construction began on Sept. 15, 1957 when Jim was 20 years old. This year the company is celebrating its 60th anniversary.

Jim had been working construction, building high-rise apartment buildings in Hamilton. A little while after the company he worked for went bankrupt, Jim got a call from the apartment owners asking if he would like to take the project on and finish the job.

"I started on my own ... that lasted a couple years [in Hamilton] ... or a year anyways, and then I started [in Centre Wellington] doing small renovations. That's all I got," Jim said. "And it was tough going."

At the time, Jim also had his dad working for him. They completed renovations and built houses.

"I had no land to build on so the houses I would get to build ... were referrals and it was VLA, that's Veterans Land Act ... and the others were the farmers who had severed off an acre or three quarters of an acre of the corner of their farm, maybe 20, 30 years ago for the retirement home," Jim explained. "When I built the first house for a farmer you didn't need to put an ad in the paper or TV ad or anything like that.

"I think my kindergarten picture said I was going to build houses."

- TOM KEATING, PROJECT MANAGER

"Farmers ... are all the same, it's word of mouth."

At the time Jim said contracts were agreed to with a simple handshake.

When Jim married his wife Fran, she began working for the business and all three of their children - Steve, Jo Ann (Brohman) and Tom - all helped out with the business over the years as well. Both Tom and Steve have prominent roles in Keating Construction now.

Throughout its 60 years Keating Construction has always focused on custom quality homes and has generally peaked at about 25 new builds a year.

"What dad's done for the last 60 years and what we're doing still today is we sign the contracts with [buyers], we do the walk-throughs with them and every point in between. We're there for them and we're able to do that because we only build 25 homes a year," Tom said. "We enjoy having that ability to meet with the clients and be personally involved and we wouldn't enjoy it if we built 200, it would just be a factory...

"That's why we build what we do, because often times there's more demand, we could build more but we like having that so that's what we offer I think at the end of the day."

Tom, 44, joined the company after he graduated from university and is now the company's project manager.

"I think my kindergarten picture said I was going to build houses," Tom said. "It was something I never really thought about just always enjoyed.

"Whether I was going to work here or somewhere else I guess could have always been up for discussion, but I never really knew any different maybe."

Jim added that even when Tom was a kid he would go down to the construction site to help before and after school.

Steve, Jim's eldest son, returned to Keating Construction after working in purchasing for a few years after graduating from college.

"I was a purchasing manager for a few different companies and then came back here," Steve said. "I always knew I was going to come back.

"It was kind of like being a farmer's son, you know you don't look anywhere else, this is what you know.

"It was a good decision to come back."

It was around the time that Steve began at Keating that the brothers remember working on Station Square, their most memorable project to date.

Station Square is a condominium for active adults in Elora, Jim explained, and it took about 13 years to become a reality.

"I was in university while the planning process was going through and my field of study evolved around that project and I was able to use that project as examples in a lot of different courses."

For Steve, Station Square was his most memorable build because it was the project of the moment when he rejoined the company.

"That was totally different from anything I'd done here before as a youngster working and you know at times there might have been 50 people on that job site between the brick layers and everybody working inside," Steve said.

The lot was overgrown before Keating Construction started the development but Fran said Jim always knew how he wanted the two municipal blocks to look.

"He had a vision of what that project was going to look like when he bought that property and then he tied it in with another piece of property on another corner for our sales office," she said. "But this was all a vision that he could see in his mind and he wouldn't give up until he did it.

"I was ready to pack in and move out of town because everyone was ticked off at us but he was so determined to make that fly and he could see that building before a shovel even went in the ground."

The Keatings also mentioned the Old Quarry Commons office complex and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation healthy housing competition as memorable builds.

The Old Quarry Commons is located across from the Elora Quarry on Mill Street East.

"We built a 40,000 square-foot office building and that was ... employment lands that we brought to the community and I still think that was good of us to do that," Tom said.

"Not every builder wants to touch that field ... but we feel when you're building houses in a community you should really build a place for people to work."



THE EARLY DAYS - JIM AND HIS NEWLY LETTERED TRUCK

"When I built the first house for a farmer you didn't need to put an ad in the paper or TV ad or anything like that. Farmers ... are all the same, it's word of mouth."

- JAMES KEATING, FOUNDER

The healthy housing competition was a project the whole company worked on that won a national award and "the most publicity of anything we've ever [done]," Tom said.

In 1995 Jim asked all his staff to come up with suggestions for how to build a house that was energy efficient, environmentally responsible, had good indoor air quality and was economically feasible. Everyone worked together and they won the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation healthy housing award.

Fran said the people who bought the award-winning house at the corner of Keating Drive and Colborne Street in Elora still live there.

The staff has always been an important factor to the company. Though the Keatings are still very involved in Keating Construction, Tom said it's the staff that make the business a success. But at the beginning it was just Jim.

"I ran the business for I guess it was 10 years before we got married and it was Fran and myself," Jim said. "Fran ran the office and did all the colour coordinating and I did the selling and the final inspection and ordering and the subs and everything, worked day and night.

"And now it's different."

Now the company has a full staff.

"We don't want people to think we're the backbone and have to do everything because we don't," Tom said. "People when they call they'd like to meet a Keating but once we start a project they don't feel that the only person they can talk to is a Keating, they understand that we've got other people and as long as those people are giving them the answers they want and doing as they ask they're quite happy to deal with a staff member, you know somebody else.

"So we have a lot of good people that help us run projects and be on the site."

But having staff doesn't stop the Keatings from being recognized around town.

"I'm sure all four of us will tell you we bump into people on the street ... that (say) 'oh your dad built my house 30 years ago' and they're proud to tell you that," Steve said. "So it's nice that ... Tom and I are still in the business and it's still going on with somebody with the last name Keating."

Tom said that's just one of the many reasons the business is so focused on building top quality homes.

"I always tell people, there's only so many aisles in the grocery store ... your customers are in there too and you can only hide in so many different spots, so you have to build something you're proud of because if you're proud of it then you did a good job," Tom said.

He added that Keating's customer base is largely local and Steve said the sub-trade contractors are also local, meaning they're often available quickly when customers need assistance.

"Lots of them have been here a long time and we try to be loyal with them and that's how we get service out of them," Tom said. "You can always shop around price but then when you have a house that's five years old and have a real issue they're still doing our work ...

"When you change your sub-contracts ... every year or every five years you lose that loyalty with them and what they bring to the table for your clients."

Keating Construction also does custom builds and renovations throughout Centre Wellington, Kitchener, Waterloo and Guelph.

Some notable projects the company recently worked on are renovations to the municipal building in Elora, work on the Elora Brewing Company building and gutting a few buildings at the Elora Mill. In addition, Keating Construction also built one of the new buildings at the mill.

"They wanted us to do a lot more but we're not that big. We wouldn't be able to handle the houses then," Jim said.

BL

PHOTOS: P. 8 JAIME MYSLIK, SOPHIE HOGAN; P. 9 SUBMITTED