

# Builder's success is sweeter 2nd time around

By Corinne Abelt  
staff writer

Robert Blake, developer/entrepreneur, may have tripped a couple of times on his climb to the top, but it didn't slow him down for long.

Blake, 38, single, a graduate of West Bloomfield High School, president of Holly Development Corp. of Corona del Mar, Calif., lives in Newport Beach, Calif., but comes to Michigan at least 15 times a year.

Now that he's developing the 10-acre Bloomfield Ridge site at the corner of Middlebelt and Maple, he's here even more.

His first California contemporary home, priced in excess of \$500,000 and built on the seven-acre site on that corner, is almost complete.

"We're looking diligently to buy major office property here. The Michigan market is better than the Orange County market now. Michigan has really revived. We've done quite well in the past two years," he said with a smile in his voice.

"We have about 2 1/2 million square feet of office space going up in California."

He said he is also interested in acquiring industrial property in the Salt Lake City area on a sale lease-back arrangement, to become established in that marketplace.

Blake has been working in the building trades since he was 12. By 18, he

was making real estate deals.

"I still occasionally put up dry wall or paint; I'm still a mud-on-the-boots builder."

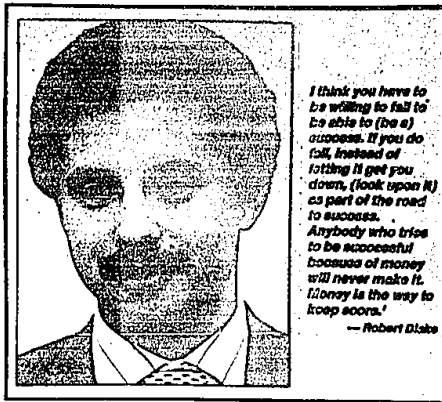
**HOLLY DEVELOPMENT.** He said, was started six years ago but wasn't very active until the last two years. "I'd say 99 percent of my success has been in the last two years. Three years ago I was broke in this area, working on real estate deals with my family. I've seen failure and I've seen success."

As he spoke about the turnaround from failure to success, he became philosophical, attributing it more to a change in his attitude than a lucky break.

One of his early mistakes, he said, "was not realizing the importance of the relationships, not being concerned with the people around you."

He paused to separate the past from the present and continued, "Every relationship in our company, from the secretaries to the executives and chairman of the board are all important. Everybody in all the companies I deal with is important. Genuinely caring is really the secret."

Admitting that he might have been a little casual about costs, he said, "A deep understanding of the marketplace you're in is important — and figuring bottom line costs... Persistence is crucial. Billy Joel's song 'Second Wind' says it all. I never quit. I was never even pessimistic."



*I think you have to be willing to fail to be able to (be a) success. If you do fail, instead of letting it get you down, (look upon it) as part of the road to success. Anybody who tries to be successful because of money will never make it. Money is the way to keep scores.*

— Robert Blake

Before he returned to building and developing, Blake was an undergraduate in research psychology at Stanford. He was instrumental in the research and writing of a book, "Shyness and What To Do About It." He left college

In his final year, not because he didn't like it, but because there was more money to be made elsewhere.

WRITING WILL always be a part of his life. He's going to self-publish his

first book of poetry and he's working on his first novel.

The poet/writer pops out in his conversation. "You start out with this canvas and it's empty. You can paint as pretty a picture as you want. And there will be black marks. I'd like for the rest of my life to be bright, cheering, interesting and clear. The United States has opportunities that nowhere else has. It's not as easy in the rest of the world to do what we do here."

"You can fall flat on your face and get up and the next year be back on top. I started over three times. I went bankrupt once. Even developers I know who have been successful have gone through very hard times. I think you have to be willing to fail to be able to (be a) success. If you do fail, instead of letting it get you down, (look upon it) as part of the road to success."

"Anybody who tries to be successful because of money will never make it. Money is the way to keep scores." And then as if talking to himself, he said slowly, "It is just a game. Sometimes I get upset, furious, pull my hair out, (I remind myself) it is just a game."

HE ALSO attributes his failures partly to his "earlier flamboyance," saying, "I've gone from flamboyant to low key. It's a lot more comfortable."

He still is a natty dresser, but on the conservative side of gray on gray and soft pastel accents. Instead of the flashy foreign cars of several years ago, he drives a black Ford Taurus. Am convertible and tolerates the teasing of friends who accuse him of reliving his high school fantasy.

He counters by saying, "I like the car. I like driving American cars."

Blake said his parents, who still live in West Bloomfield, always had high expectations for his brother, Donald, sister, Susan, and himself.

"I remember I used to come home with a report card — an A was an A and a B was a B. Our parents always believed you could be the best. For us, it was beneficial. None of us did better than my sister. My brother, Dr. Donald Blake, is a nuclear radiologist at Beaumont Hospital, and my sister, who is brilliant, is in the MBA program at Tufts Business School (Princeton University)."

Robert Blake, entrepreneur, poet, philosopher, psychology student and novelist, stood in the almost completed house at Middlebelt and Maple in a well-tailored gray suit, pale red tie and lavender striped shirt.

He extended his arms wide, turned around once and said, "There is no greater feeling than looking at a building I built with pride."

## Putting yourself to work at home

Continued from Page 1

"Most people are undercapitalized. They don't realize what it takes to start a business — even in the home. There's less cash needed if it's a service, but if you're making something, you need to buy materials."

"I take a wholistic approach to starting a business. It requires wholistic thinking because it involves your whole life," she added.

Fenster and Gash understand that all too well.

"When you work at home it's difficult," Gash admitted. "People think you sit around twiddling your thumbs. You must take yourself seriously in a home-based business. You need to have some private space at home."

"When we contact wholesalers for supplies, because we're small and home-based, we've gotten some resistance. It takes persistence."

A supportive family and advice of other home-based entrepreneurs are other vital keys to success.

GASH'S HUSBAND, a physician, helps install

claps on the pair's line of suede purses. Fenster's artist-husband has designed the firm's business stationery and cards. Daughters in both families test market the bells, purses, hats and sweatshirts that their mothers produce.

The pair met through a needwork association and toyed with the idea of starting a business for a few years, before taking the plunge. With a \$2,000 investment last year, they bought fabric, registered their business name — Personalities — and began sewing. They also took Brodsky's three-week course, which Gash said "caused us to look inward and ask is this the right business and what are our long-term goals."

Both took a realistic approach to self-employment. They knew the business would demand long hours and that profits would be reinvested into materials. But they also enjoyed the flexibility of working at home and the satisfaction that came with the sale of their handmade creations.

Talking with other women who had successfully started their own businesses was an invaluable ex-

perience for the pair.

"Some kind souls told us what to do in the beginning," Gash recalled. "Friends would say, 'Why don't you talk to so-and-so.' Networking was extremely helpful."

Personalities markets its products through home parties, word-of-mouth and craft shows. The pair have avoided retail stores because the move would involve increased volume of sales — and the necessity of hiring more help.

"You have to be thick-skinned to take your products to stores," Gash added. "And you must expect to sell at wholesale prices. We have been disappointed because our wares have been turned away. You learn something every day in this business, even after this time. We're still getting burned in some situations. But we established good habits in the very beginning."

Added Fenster: "We've been lucky. We've had more ups than downs. For every three times we've been up, we've had one down."

## Get started in business of joining clubs

By Marilyn Fitchett  
staff writer

You've just started your own business and you're confused with making a go of it. You've taken a leave of absence from anything that pulls you away from your venture. Invitations to join professional organizations are routinely ignored. After all, how can you afford the time?

Perhaps you can't afford not to make the time. At least that's the belief of Pam Kosteva, business owner and publicity chairman for the Michigan Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO).

"When you've started a new business, you're padding as fast as you can. You don't have the time to attend business functions when you need them the most," Kosteva said.

Kosteva learned the hard way that a professional

organization can be a business owner's best friend.

When she and husband Dave purchased the Cheese & Wine Barn in Plymouth, they planned to operate a local retail business. After the recession reduced their sales, Kosteva found herself wanting to expand into corporate sales. She made menus, cards, and brochures for the Cheese & Wine Barn business card, which described her company as the "specialty shop with cozy country charm." She was getting nowhere.

Then a client suggested that she change her marketing strategy. Kosteva's new business card introduces her as president of New Departure, which handles catering, business gift programs, promotional incentive awards and specialty food and wine baskets.

She's getting her message across but regrets the lost time and the lost sales.

"I did it myself, and it cost me in terms of time

and development," Kosteva said.

AFTER SHE joined NAWBO, she said she found herself picking up "the subtle things" of business ownership in conversations with members.

Joining this organization is a positive experience for the new, the middle and the settled-in business owner. There's a great commitment to pass on what you've learned. These women are willing to share. It sounds overused, but the "good old boy network" is something we have not had. Women recognize how tough it was for them and are willing to pass on what they've learned."

Membership chairman is Sheila Kasselman. She can be reached at her Birmingham business, Net Worth, by calling 646-0633.

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