

Building Scene

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Marilyn Fitchett editor/591-2300



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Carol Lee finds the New Generation Builders Council informative.

JIM JAGDELD/staff photographer

Network

New generation of builders band together to learn ropes

By Doug Funke
staff writer

You can learn things the hard way through trial and error. Or you can learn the easy way through the experiences of others.

The New Generation Builders Council, with an emphasis on the second approach, is a loosely organized network organized last year by the Builders' Association of Southeastern Michigan for people new to the business.

They could be builders, developers or suppliers. They may have no family ties to the business or close family associations but not much personal involvement.

Those who think they might be interested in the building industry are welcome. So are seasoned veterans.

"We try to provide a more informal forum to learn nuts and bolts of building," said Nancy Bonadeo, a Plymouth building executive in her mid-30s and co-chairwoman of the council.

"We kind of draw a group of people who in some ways wouldn't be comfortable attending large general meetings of the association," said John Bollen Jr. 37, a Troy builder and co-chairman of the council.

Carey Peters, a staff member for the B.A.S.M. helped start the council.

"A LOT OF our people are ready for retirement in the next few years," she said. "We need an infiltration of younger people to keep the association going."

"We find a lot of younger builders have done field work or were in an office doing book work," Peters said. "They don't know what custom-

ers needs and wants are, newest technology, how to supervise subs. That's information they're looking for now."

The council convenes for breakfast about eight times a year. The biggest crowds so far came to learn about plywood and kitchen and bath fixtures.

"We try to have one or two meetings a year we call round tables," Bollen said. "It's a cross-exchange of ideas, thoughts, questions, builders might have who may not feel comfortable addressing a larger group who knows who they are."

Some third-generation builders, like Bollen, and second-generation builders, like Bonadeo, grow up in the business.

But there's always something to learn, Bonadeo maintained.

"Perhaps it's a lesson from workers on the job you being related to the boss," she said. "It certainly would provide a sharing of common experiences, ideas how one person handled it."

Gregory Benson, 32, is a third-generation builder.

"It's been a pretty fair exchange about what's going on, who's doing what, how sales and traffic are," he said of the sessions. "That's pretty valuable information in our business."

Then there are the new builders like Carol Lee, 25, of Livonia. She found little fulfillment in inside sales work and as a real estate agent.

Her father, Alex Fofrigio, had built a few industrial buildings as a personal sideline investment kind of thing, but wasn't even a licensed builder.

THE TWO built a house for Lee, then afterwards, obtained licenses

She since has established her own building company, Five Star Construction, and has built several more houses.

Lee finds the council informative. "I'm basically going there because it's filled with people who know what's going on," she said. "I'm there to listen. You're in a room with people who do this every day."

"It was strictly a learn-by- mistake thing," Lee said of her initial building experience. "In this business, mistakes cost money so you learn quick."

Simple things that might not occur to a novice like getting trades people on site at the right time can make all the difference in the world, she said.

Robert Hall, manager of the builders sales division for Erl Lumber of Birmingham, has attended several meetings.

"It gives us a chance to learn about builders' business, meet customers and it gives us a teaching forum as well," he said. "There's a lot to know in this business. Getting the word out is extremely important to us."

Lee said she's amazed by the willingness of other builders to share information.

"That will make the industry stronger, bring a community spirit into the industry and make it better in the long run," Bonadeo said.

"You may not always want to ask a certain question in front of your competition," Bollen said, "but everyone is usually pretty open."

There's a certain camaraderie when you get together," Benson said. "A lot of people are looking over their shoulder. That never bothered me."



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