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A passion for building
Otterbeck Builders



 **OTTERBECK BUILDERS** *inc.*
Custom Homes & Remodeling
otterbeckbuilders.com
518-477-1438



Enlarging a small ranch-house kitchen required expanding back from the original footprint (opp. page). Otterbeck, working with the homeowners' vision and Zarrillo's Custom Design Kitchens, turned a basic kitchen into a spacious gourmet kitchen and cozy sitting room (inset) where cooking and mingling with family and guests is a pleasure.

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A passion for building

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BY CRAIG STEVENS

The first time the name Dett Otterbeck clearly registered in my mind it was associated with a good deed its bearer had done. Dett had helped lead a renovation necessary to the survival of a Rensselaer church's soup kitchen. The recognition made me think that maybe I had read his name before, also in connection with charitable activities. I checked and indeed I had. But that only meant he probably was a good citizen with a good heart. It didn't necessarily mean he was a good contractor. But once the Otterbeck name was firmly ensconced in my memory I took heed of other references from suppliers and from Dett's peers and competitors. Things like: "Do you know Dett? You will like him. ... Have you seen Otterbeck's work? ... You ought to keep Dett Otterbeck in mind when you go looking for a good remodeler to profile in the magazine."

When Butch Grignon merged his business, Grignon Construction, into Otterbeck Builders, I was convinced the references were valid. We had gotten to know Butch some years ago when we did a feature on his own remodeling company. It stood to reason that if Butch found Otterbeck Builders' standards compatible with his own, then Otterbeck Builders should be in our spotlight.

BORN AND RAISED in Nassau in Rensselaer County, New York, Dett's interest in construction came naturally. His uncle, cousin and one brother all worked as carpenters. His father was a union carpenter who worked on Albany's South Mall. Still, Dett had mixed feelings about that occupation. He saw how frequently his dad was subject to layoffs.

Nevertheless, upon leaving high school Dett started work as a laborer for Wood Brothers, owned by Richard Wood, Sr., the father of Dett's future wife and partner Julie. Dett recalls that "At the time, Julie's dad had a house crew and two remodeling crews. After a year I got laid off. Then for about a year or so I worked two jobs, at Key Bank and Hess. Then I returned to Wood Brothers, working on and then running a house framing crew."

By the time he was 25 and for the next decade Dett was primarily a Wood Brothers framing subcontractor. "When the house market would slow, we would dabble in remodeling. When the last new house slowdown occurred, we moved strongly into remodeling. We joined the builders association and started to grow. Then Butch came on with us and we really started growing rapidly."

Julie (Wood) Otterbeck's family goes back several generations in construction. Her grandfather was a large commercial builder in Boston, and just a few years ago



BEFORE PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HOMEOWNER

her father retired from home building and remodeling after 48 years in the business. Nevertheless, she and Dett started Otterbeck Builders virtually from scratch. At first, Julie says, "I had a full-time position unrelated to the business. Until our first son Nick was born every night I would do the invoicing and pay the bills." At first the "office" was in one of their bedrooms. Then their second son Corey arrived and the office had to move elsewhere.

A BIG TRANSITION came for the couple when they decided to take some risks and strive to truly root, cultivate and grow a company. This meant a financial commitment and a commitment to develop and retain a capable staff of employees. They opened an office/showroom on Route 20 in the former location of Wood Brothers, and Julie became the full-time bookkeeper/accountant. Then Butch Grignon joined the company.

Dett and Butch met through the Albany Area Builders Association and in particular its Remodelers Council.

They became friends before becoming business allies. Butch says "I think we have the same mind set. We do things similarly in the way we estimate and produce. We see eye-to-eye. Dett lets me do what I need to do for the good of the company. He understands that my focus is on the company's growth. I push as hard here as I did when running my own company. We all share in the rewards."

"Remodeling is a very hands-on

Otterbeck successfully added a sitting room and screened porch addition while maintaining the historic integrity of this gracious old Colonial home.



business," says Butch. "We are the first level, and the second level is the guys in the field. We both deal with sales and marketing and customer satisfaction. Dett manages his projects and I manage mine. When a lead comes in one of us follows through with the prospective client. Once the lead becomes a project that same one carries through to completion. Still, we frequently consult with each other and are there to fill in during an

absence. This benefits the customer as well as the company."

Having Butch as part of their management team has helped the Otterbecks in several ways. He brought along his excellent reputation, list of satisfied clients, experience and skills. Dett says "Before we merged we might have done our financial reviews quarterly. We knew that wasn't good but there was so little time. Now we have a company-wide meeting every two weeks. That helps keep up the team spirit. Now we update our job progress and costing weekly. Now I can take time to plan our growth. Before, there was always something

What Otterbeck Customers say ...

"... Everyone who has seen our new screen room has commented on how well it matches our house and how beautiful it is. There was obviously a great deal of attention given to every detail. We couldn't be happier."

(homeowners N.C and D.C)

"... It's not often that you hear about good experiences when it comes to home remodeling or dealing with construction contractors, but we had both, and it is to the credit of the experienced professionals that represent Otterbeck Builders. From the original design phase [of a great room addition] ... through actual construction our ideas, concerns and needs were addressed without question or hesitation."

(homeowners J.G. and K.G.)

"... It was a pleasure to do work with Wilfred [Butch] Grignon again. I'm sure Butch's father is pleased with the way he completes his work. Will was a great finish carpenter and so is Butch. ... A kitchen remodel is a very disruptive project but you carried this out quickly, on time and with minimum disruption to our lives. Now that they are gone, I miss breakfast with Butch and Charlie. ... You manage a very efficient and classy building business."

(homeowners L.F and M. F.)

"... [O]ur Cusack Pavilion Window Replacement project ... replaced approximately 420 windows. ... This work proceeded through less than ideal weather and mostly in occupied offices. All the work was professionally coordinated and accomplished. Many thanks to ... the installation crew from Otterbeck Builders."

(St. Peter's Hospital to Crawford Door and Window Sales)



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HOMEOWNER





PHOTOS COURTESY OF OTTERBECK BUILDERS



else going on, something else to think about. The first year Butch was here Julie and I took the first real vacation we had ever had! We could leave knowing things would be cared for just as if we were here. We still do a 10- to 12-hour day, but we look at that as a break. Before we got together there were many 18-hour days."

FOR THE MOST part, the company's niche in the remodeling market isn't glamorous. At its simpler end it involves the basics of window and door replacement, roofing and siding, or simple repair or maintenance tasks for established clients. The kind of projects that virtually every homeowner will need or want at some point. The kind that lead to repeat customers and larger projects when the customer is well-satisfied. At the more complex end, it can involve carefully designed decks, sunrooms, kitchens and baths and elaborate additions. Or the replacement of over 400 windows, as an Otterbeck crew accomplished for St. Peter's Hospital, with little disruption to the activities around them.

Obviously the company wants to do and does do large, creative projects, but Dett believes "There is a lot of 'normal' work good people want done where you don't have to put the 'upscale' description in front of it. They want to be treated with respect and receive an above average product for their money. Most of all they don't want to be shystered."

The proof of Dett's assertion is the company's growth. Doing plenty of "normal" work, the company's size and breadth of projects and dollar volume have shown dramatic increases. Seventy to 80 remodeling projects ranging in price from \$5,000 to \$150,000 is now the norm. In addition, the number of employees has grown into the teens. One key part-time member is Julie's brother Rick Wood, an Auto Cad teacher at Hudson Valley Community College. Rick manages the company's new housing division and

does the company's in-house computer-assisted design work. Another key player is production coordinator Rudy Jahn, who makes sure all the supplies and support teams are at the right project at the right time.

The Otterbecks are ever-watchful for good new additions to their team of craftsmen. This may become an even more important task as Otterbeck Builders' new home division prospers. The company builds traditional on-site

The Otterbeck crew turns a tired old kitchen into a more spacious one by extending out over part of the existing deck with the help of cabinetry from Builders' Kitchens.

East Coast, and the second largest such manufacturer in the country. Excel has produced over 12,000 homes in its 18-year history and has the capacity to manufacture 2,000 custom homes per year. The Liverpool, Pennsylvania-based firm has a wide

Otterbeck Builders, Inc. At-a-Glance

Founders and Principals: Dett and Julie Otterbeck, 1988

Operations Manager: Butch Grignon

Services: Residential Remodeling, New Home Construction, Light Commercial Remodeling

Service Area: Greater Capital Region

Membership: Capital Region Builders and Remodelers Association/ Remodelers Council

Certification: Certified Pella Contractor

Sales Office/Showroom: 4151 US Route 20, Castleton, NY 12033

Telephone: (518) 477-1438; *Facsimile:* (518) 477-2572

Web site: www.otterbeckbuilders.com

ON THE COVER: The staff of Otterbeck Builders Inc. at a completed Excel modular home.

© Randall Perry Photography. Detailed:

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|--------------------|--------------------|
| A. Greg Gehan | H. Robert Lent |
| B. John Ashle | I. Greg Mazzola |
| C. Kevin Hitchcock | J. Rudy Jahn |
| D. Jason Watson | K. Butch Grignon |
| E. Joe Carbonaro | L. Rick Wood |
| F. Tom Johnson | M. Dett Otterbeck |
| G. Allen Bruce | N. Julie Otterbeck |



stick-built homes, but it is the value the company finds in its stick-built, modular home franchise that has the Otterbecks excited.

In 2001, Dett and Julie acquired an Excel Homes franchise that Wood Brothers had used to construct several modular homes in Rensselaer County. Dett had worked on the homes, so he knew the process and the quality before they began marketing them to customers.

EXCEL HOMES is the leading manufacturer of modular homes on the

range of stock plans ranging from just over 700 square feet to in excess of 3,200, each of which can be modified. Plus it can engineer and manufacture a home to a client's personal design specifications.

Excel Homes offer a prospective buyer several advantages that all lead to a high standard of quality. All the building materials used are nationally-known brands. Construction takes place within the company's plant under climate-controlled conditions, so neither the materials nor the

craftsmen who install them are subjected to adverse precipitation, humidity, heat, cold or sunlight. Quality control is standardized and constant. Energy efficiency and low maintenance are given priority consideration. Plus there is a lengthy list of available product and finish options.

While a typical Excel Homes structure arrives on site about 85% complete, Otterbeck Builders still plays several key roles. They work with the customer to determine the home's design and to choose options. In some cases they will help them find a building site. They will see to it that the infrastructure is prepared and the foundation is ready for the special site crew to raise the house (which may only take a single day), and then they ensure that the mechanical hook-ups are properly completed. When a customer wants products or options not offered by Excel, Otterbeck Builders will provide them. For example should a customer want cabinets from Builders' Kitchens or another local supplier or Pella Windows (both Dett and Butch are Certified Pella installers) they can order them separately.

The net result is that a home buyer can obtain and occupy a well-built home in 8 to 10 weeks, not 8 to 10 months. It is typical to have the house on site in 6 to 8 weeks after the design is approved. Then another week or two is required to reach completion.

While some consumers hold reservations about the modular concept, both Dett and Butch are quick to say it is a matter of perception. If a consumer thinks of a prefabricated, trailer-like shell of a generation or more ago, they are not envisioning a custom, stick-built Excel Homes modular. Which is why after building several Excel Homes, they asked that the cover show an Excel home — that looks conventional in every way.

SPEC SHEET

Builders Kitchens, Inc:

Cabinetry

Crawford Door and Window

Sales: Pella windows/doors

Curtis Lumber Co.: Lumber,

millwork

Excel Homes: Modular home systems

Zarrillo's Custom Design

Kitchens: Cabinetry

An Excel Home on-site set-up process ...



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HOMEOWNER

I ASKED DETT what he sees as the strength of his company. To the same question some contractors will immediately cite their craftsmanship, which is certainly a good answer. But Dett had a different answer: "I think it is our professionalism and honesty. ... Our basic service, our basic philosophy is to provide our customers with a high quality product. We hear 'the horror stories' from our customers about their past experiences. Neither Butch nor Julie nor I want to be the subject of one of those stories. It's our reputation. We want to be known as one of the 'good ones.' "

I can attest to the Otterbeck Builders professionalism firsthand. Every request we made to Dett, Julie and Butch to help prepare this article — supplier and customer references, opportunities to see examples of their work and so on — was promptly and courteously fulfilled. And when we sat down for an extended interview, every question was answered with forthright candor, almost as if we were old



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trusted friends catching up after years of separation. And not one criticism of a competitor entered their conversation.

I also saw Otterbeck Builders' professionalism in another way. After a decade of meeting and writing about contractors, it is my opinion that as a group they have much the same range of ethics and competence as there is found in most other occupations. But all the contractors, make that all the successful contractors I have met share one characteristic: none is the least bit lazy. But a *passion* for building as a service occupation is another thing. Whether it be the steps taken to satisfy customers, even those who are inherently demanding, eccentric or difficult, or methods used to stimulate employees to perform at their best level or ways to provide a better product, I can say with considerable confidence that I have met few contractors as passionate about their work as I found within Otterbeck Builders.

