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SUNDAY BREAKFAST

Pickell's blueprint is to build for the long haul

■ BY DAVID SWEET

When Orren Pickell grew up, he said no one — from his parents to his teachers — explained that, if he chose, one day he could go into business for himself.

So it was a revelation for him at age 17 to join entrepreneur Tom Keck in Oak Brook as a painting contractor.

"It was eye-opening to see how he ran a business," says Pickell, who eventually put himself through Bradley University in Peoria — where he studied architecture and construction — by working long hours for his own painting business.

That firm has metamorphosed today into Orren Pickell Building Group. The custom-home-building firm in Northfield has notched numerous awards, including the "Best In American Living Award" from the National Association of Home Builders, and at one point employed more than 130. Though the housing downturn nearly knocked him out — an investment group acquired the assets of Orren Pickell Designers & Builders LLC for \$350,000 a few years back, according to Crain's Chicago Business, and retained Pickell as president and chief executive officer — he remains a force in high-end homebuilding on the North Shore and elsewhere.

"What a custom home builder does is design and build people's dreams," explains Pickell, who constructed his own dream house in Mettawa during the 1980s along with another later in Lake Geneva. "Real custom is when the client comes to you because they want your abilities."

Pickell's company has jettisoned any interest in speculative development after a numbing foray. In 2007, near the height of the market, his firm bought the historic Lansdowne estate in Lake Bluff and subdivided its 21 acres. Even after slashing the lot prices by 25 percent in 2010, buyers were scarce.

"I lost a ton," Pickell said. "In the past during a downturn people would buy great land that was stable — land on the shore in a town with great schools. I had never seen quality real estate decline in value. If I hadn't been developing property, I would have been in great shape."

Running a debt-free company today which builds homes in Wisconsin, Indiana and Michigan along with Illinois, Pickell remains busy, especially as business is improving.



Orren Pickell

ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT

"My job is to solve problems that will always come up," says Pickell, whose company boasts a 95 percent on-time construction ranking. "There's design issues. Maybe the cabinetry didn't fit together, though it looks good on drawings. You have to walk through and say, 'That's not how we planned it.'"

Pickell enjoys designing and trying to figure out how to grow the 22-employee firm, which includes his daughter Lisa as chief operating officer. He starts each day by reading the Bible.

"It's very important. It keeps you centered," he says. "Whatever you believe in, you should focus on it once a day to keep your bearings. It helps me keep peace within myself."

Pickell believes in giving back. His company is helping to remodel distressed housing in North Chicago and sell it to people for one-third of their income.

"That's been very rewarding," he says.

Pickell notes that he's always wanted to build houses, and he started in Elmhurst in the mid-1970s. Faced with a lot he had purchased but not feeling competent to build upon it with no experience, he happened to run into a mason, and they started in. After three months of 15-16 hour days, Pickell's first house was standing (and still stands today).

Perhaps his most memorable day in the industry occurred in the 1980s on the coldest day in Chicago history, marked by a wind chill of 66 degrees below zero.

"My crew and I were framing a roof. The crew wanted to go home, and my dog wouldn't get out of the truck," he recalled. "We kept working as the black lab watched through the windshield. Back when men were men and dogs were smarter than me. I've changed my tune a little since then."

For Sunday breakfast, Pickell enjoys heading to Walker Bros. The Original Pancake House ("great food, and I happened to build a house for Ray Walker"). To relax, Pickell — who once participated in the Mackinac Island race — enjoys sailing when he can.

"Sailing, just like reading the Bible, brings you peace," he said. "Some people like to golf. I like the water. I always have." ■

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