

# NORTH BRUNSWICK NBM MAGAZINE

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Winter 2010-11

## The Roger Bacon Academy Scores Big

An Afternoon at  
Orton Plantation

The New  
Wilmington Convention Center

North Brunswick's  
"Biggest Loser"



Meet your neighbors:

- Jack Batson, Mayor of Belville
- Craig Stevens
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- The Congregation of Blackwell  
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Complimentary

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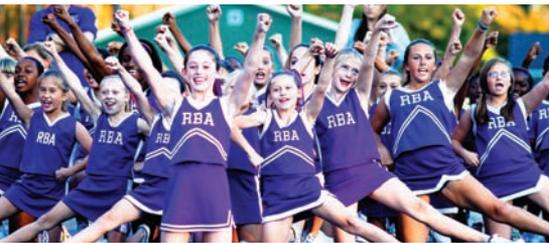


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# Craig Stevens

# BUILDING BUSINESS IN THE CAPE FEAR

**Craig** Stevens has building in his blood. A third-generation builder, he grew up watching his father build apartments and houses in Raleigh, North Carolina, during the housing booms of the 1970s and 1980s. As he grew old enough to help on the jobsite, Stevens picked up a broom, then a hammer, then more and more responsibility, learning both the business and fabrication side of building from the inside out.

At North Carolina State University, Stevens studied business, knowing he wanted to work in real estate or construction post-graduation. When he earned his degree in the early 1990s he entered the job market eager to make his mark on the world.

Years of family vacations on the coast drew Stevens to New Hanover County after college. In 1991 he began selling real estate for Hanover Realty. At the time, Bill Saffo was broker-in-charge and his father, Doky Saffo, was still active in the business as developer of Whispering Pines in Wilmington. Stevens' track record as a Realtor and his background in construction caught the eye of Doky Saffo.

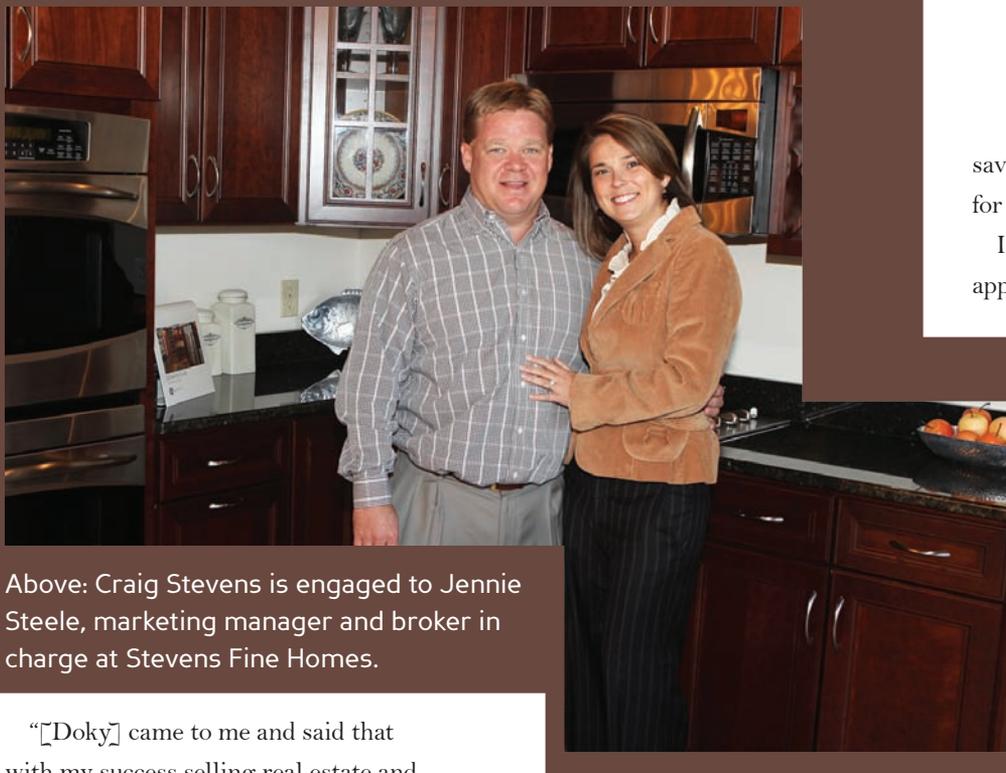
STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH KETCHUM





KUBOTA



Above: Craig Stevens is engaged to Jennie Steele, marketing manager and broker in charge at Stevens Fine Homes.

“[Doky] came to me and said that with my success selling real estate and my construction background, I should shift away from the real estate side and begin selling home and lot packages,” Stevens says. “I bought several lots from Hanover Realty, built spec homes and sold them. I’ve been hooked ever since.”

Through the late 1990s, Stevens expanded his operation, working hand-in-hand with the Saffos and Hanover Realty to provide homes in many of the developments they represented. In 2000, when the real estate market experienced a short downturn, Stevens took advantage of falling land prices and favorable interest rates and purchased land across New Hanover and Brunswick counties, looking to the future when the market would rebound and he could sell lot/home packages more readily.

His gamble paid off. As the area climbed out of the recession and the housing boom started in earnest, Stevens sold lots, spec homes and lot/home packages at an incredible and increasing rate. In 2005 he peaked at 325 homes sold, with 90 of those selling in Brunswick County’s Mallory Creek

Plantation in a three-month span.

The next year followed close on the heels of 2005’s stellar sales numbers.

“We had such a successful two-year period that we sold out of property,” Stevens says. “Then, during the decline in 2007 and 2008, we were struggling, just like everyone else, and we knew we needed to make some changes.”

Stevens was already on high alert because of the overall market decline, but it was 2008’s self-admitted “terrible numbers” — when they sold only 68 homes — that pushed him to reevaluate the company and its product.

“We knew we needed to respond to the market and change our processes and products,” Stevens says.

With an eye on future energy costs, Stevens and his team began building Energy Star Plus-certified homes. Initial designs were to be at least 15 percent more energy efficient than traditionally built homes, but Stevens took extra steps to increase efficiency and says his homes are typically 20 to 30 percent more efficient than other homes. This means a significant

savings on heating and cooling costs for the life of the home.

In changing his designs and approach to energy efficiency, Stevens

saw holes in the company’s operational efficiencies and moved to plug them. One major way he became more efficient was by expanding his design studio to make design choices easier for homebuyers. In the studio, buyers select all of the finishes, fixtures and features they want in their home. Samples of

everything from countertops and showerheads to chandeliers and shingles are available for homeowners to browse and combine in any number of ways.

The expanded design options available to homebuyers could have been an order-tracking, job-scheduling paperwork headache for everyone involved, but through some innovative software, Stevens solved the problem before it started.

“We spent a lot of time and money getting our software solution in place, and now that the whole operation is optimized on the computer, we are so much more efficient in the office and in the field,” Stevens says.

The software Stevens uses does several things. First, it acts as a web store. When homebuyers are selecting finishes, features and products for their homes, the software tracks their selections and makes the appropriate price adjustments. Second, once the design phase is completed, the software plans a schedule from digging the

footer to the closing. Third, the software acts as an order-processing center and, with oversight from Stevens and his team, places orders with vendors and subcontractors.

Fourth, it generates reports and schedules for everyone involved in the home, from Stevens to the sales person, homebuyer, vendors and subcontractors. The schedules include installation dates, finishes and products for the home, while the reports cover everything from timelines to notes to subcontractors. Stevens says the program even has room to modify the schedules due to inclement weather, late deliveries or any factor imaginable.

Lastly, the software produces home-warranty information for the new owners.

“[This] makes it very easy for homeowners to keep up with any warranty claims they may have and makes it easy for me to keep up with the quality of my products, vendors and subcontractors,” Stevens says.

Stevens says the efficiency the software package has added to the back end of the home-building business is astonishing. Information supplied by vendors and subcontractors — including product lines and prices — is fed into the program, taking time out of negotiating each project with every vendor and subcontractor. The reports and schedules generated before work begins and during the process keeps every phase of construction to an efficient timeline and keeps everyone in

the know throughout the home-building process.

“Another benefit to our software is the reduced amount of paper we use,” Stevens says.

Site foremen can access schedules and reports from their smartphones and check off completed items rather than carrying around a sheaf of paper related to every project. The amount of physical files related to each home has also been drastically reduced since so much of the information can exist in an easier-to-access and easier-to-store digital format.

“The building industry has come a long way from where it was when Dad was working,” Stevens says. “That was before cell phones and I remember he’d get home from work and spend an hour and a half on the phone with subcontractors and vendors, getting updates, solving problems, ordering products and scheduling work. He’s

amazed at what we can do now with smartphones and computers and how, when they’re used properly, they can really improve job efficiency.”

Since introducing more efficient homes and business processes, Stevens Fine Homes has pulled itself above the negative news surrounding the real estate industry. In 2009 they sold 128 homes, nearly doubling 2008’s numbers, and they are on track to sell close to 160 homes in 2010.

“The market is no better, but the shift in our product, approach and marketing certainly is better,” Stevens says. “August and October [2010] were great months, we sold 21 homes in each of them. They’re the best months since November 2005.”

With eight developments in New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender counties where he is the exclusive or preferred builder, it is no wonder Stevens is finding such success. At all eight developments — Dogwood Lakes, Mallory Creek Plantation, Grayson



Left: Raleigh native Craig Stevens, who’s been building homes in Wilmington and Brunswick County since the 1990s, has built a recession-proof business in a place where he loves to live.



Park, Garlington Heights, Park Ridge at West Bay Estates, Deer Crossing, Willowick and Orchid Bay at Waterford — homes are selling.

Stevens believes his peak numbers and recent success reflect the drive, marketing savvy and quality product that he and his team provide.

“Our key strategy is to provide a great product in a great location,” Stevens says.

Most of the eight developments include

desirable amenities such as a community clubhouse, a pool, walking trails, nature trails and ponds. The developments have been thoughtfully located, too; all of them are within a short drive to the beach, the river or an abundance of shopping and dining options.

Currently, Stevens Fine Homes is on a 90- to 120-day build time, but other options — like spec homes — are coming on-line regularly and Stevens says homebuyers can often be in a new

home rather quickly.

The efficiency Stevens has built into his homes and his processes has allowed him to maintain his business and home sales in a difficult market without sacrificing the value, luxury and quality buyers expect.

“After we close on a home, we give the new owners a four-page survey asking them questions about all aspects of the process,” Stevens says. “Our final question is to rate the process as a whole from 0 to 100. Right now we have a 96 percent approval rating. That tells me we’re doing something right.”

It is clear that Craig Stevens is passionate about building homes, but on the rare occasion that he steps away for a breather, you’ll find him in, on or near the ocean. From visiting the beach to surfing to offshore fishing, he loves the water — it’s what drew him here and it’s what he calls “our greatest natural amenity.”

Recently Stevens became engaged to Jennie Steele, marketing manager and broker-in-charge at Stevens Fine Homes.

“To be successful in your own business, you have to work hard, deliver a great product and make sure your job is a major priority,” says Stevens. “I’m very fortunate that Jennie has the same passion and belief in our work that I do.” ■

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