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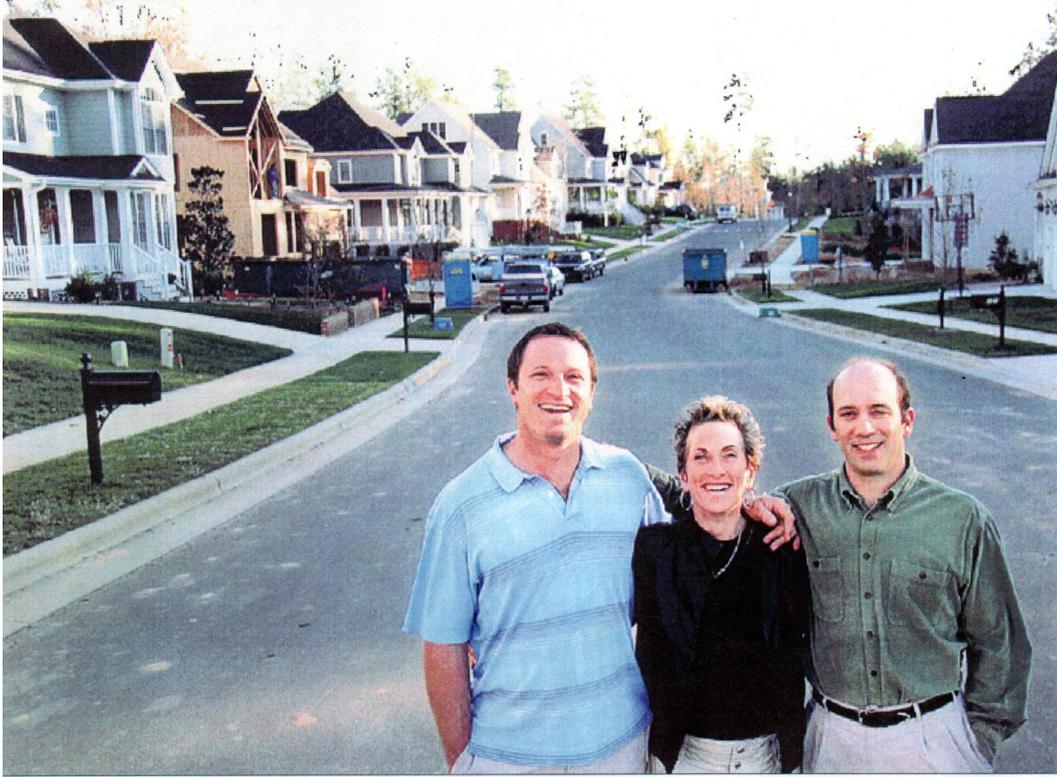


Photo by Briana Brough

Omar Zinn, left, his mother Carol Ann Zinn, and brother Adam Zinn in the Larkspur subdivision in Chapel Hill where the trio's company, Zinn Design Build, is currently building homes.

Zinns and the art of house design

Family company finds niche in booming home-building business.

BY MARK DEREWICZ
Correspondent

As young boys, Adam and Omar Zinn spent plenty of time at construction sites — a kid's dream of a playground. Omar found enough leftover material to build rafts to float on Hogan Lake near his family's home off Homestead Road.

But the Zinn brothers weren't trespassing. They were merely passing the time in the late 1970s with their mother, one of the only female developers in a male-dominated world.

Two decades later, the brothers founded Zinn Design Build alongside their mother. The com-

pany is one of the most respected design and building companies in the Triangle and recently embarked on the Claremont project, an 80-lot subdivision slated for a 28-acre tract off Homestead Road.

As Carol Ann says, her sons seemed to learn "almost through osmosis," whether they wanted to or not.

What both boys wanted immediately following their days at Chapel Hill High School was to explore options closer to their hearts. Adam, the elder son, majored in journalism at Northeastern University in Boston. Omar studied psychology and Spanish at Colorado University in Boulder.

Neither seemed destined to build houses.

After college, Adam worked as an advertising executive in the San Francisco Bay Area and later at WRAL in Raleigh. Omar served as a behavioral education specialist in Arizona's public schools before returning east.

Both were making admirable livings but neither was wholly satisfied. So in 1995 Adam approached Omar and Carol Ann with the idea of reforming the family business in Chapel Hill. Adam, 30 years old at the time, had just won his second consecutive Account Executive of the Year award at WRAL. Omar was working for WUNC as a radio engineer but was open to change.

Carol Ann had left Chapel Hill for California but decided to return when Adam called.

He knew his mother's reputation was rock-solid in Chapel Hill. He also knew the company would be well-served by his business acumen and Omar's people skills, which include fluency in Spanish.

Sure enough, the company took off, with each family member playing a vital role in the company's success.

In 2000, a Zinn home took the Best of the Best Grand Prize from the Durham-Orange County Home Builders Association. This year, a \$1.3-million Zinn home was featured on "The Fine Liv-

Network." More than anything, they love what they do, and so do their customers.

"I think Adam earned a 'master's in business administration' while working at WRAL," Carol Ann said. "He gained a bird's eye view by working with companies, seeing what worked and what didn't. Now, he's our CEO, CFO and COO."

While Adam runs the business side from an office off Providence Road in Chapel Hill, Omar serves as the lead project manager. He oversees four other project managers and communicates directly with subcontractors and on-site employees, including many Spanish speakers.

House design

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"A lot of people might try to be controlling in this sort of job," Omar said. "I think there is another way, a communicative way that is more rewarding for everyone. I try to look ahead and anticipate problems. I think my background also helps when dealing with all the different people we work with."

The mix of Zinn talents has contributed to the success of the company. "We have a passion for this," Carol Ann said. "Our talents fit together really well and we are constantly looking for ways to do things better."

Of course, things are not always rosy in a family business, but the Zinns view their familiarity as a plus.

"I'm not going to say everything always runs smoothly, but I think we can speak more freely as a family," Adam said. "I think of it as an advantage."

Carol Ann said she and her sons are more willing to work through issues. "It's not always easy, but I think we've been able to develop our relationships to a better degree than other families that may see each other a couple times a year," she said. "I think our relationships are more meaningful in 2004 than they were in '95. The three of us are very real with each other and this helps the business."

Omar added, "And really, the three of us are a part of a larger team. There are nine total employees and then the subcontractors. We use the same subcontractors for every project. We feel loyal to them, and I think they feel loyal to us."

The company has another advantage: It's local.

Nick Tennyson, executive vice president of the Durham-Orange County Home Builders Association, said the Zinns' 20-year track record speaks for itself.

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Zinn Design Build

see the company's work," Tennyson said. "Their neighborhoods are everywhere. You can see how their work has stood the test of time."

The company, which builds between 25 and 30 homes annually, uses dozens of different designs. Carol Ann, however, also customizes her work to meet her client's desires.

Amy Chute and her husband, John, chose to customize the model home at Larkspur, a Zinn development off Weaver Dairy Road in north Chapel Hill.

"Carol Ann took a lot of my ideas and made them practical," said Chute. "I think she's a real genius in terms of design and what she selects for the interior. Everything is very usable in terms of the way the modern family lives."

Kim Woodard, a Realtor with The Home Team, first worked with Carol Ann during the development of Southbridge off Culbreth Road in south Chapel Hill. After 20 years, Woodard sees clearly why the Zinns are respected.

"Carol Ann brought freshness to the market that no one else had," Woodard said. "She was the first one to design a transitional home, one with contemporary concepts but a traditional feel — arched vaulted ceilings, large windows. Without question, her designs have taken her and her sons a long way. They are well-known, even nationally, as being a step ahead. Carol Ann keeps up with trends and incorporates them into what she knows fits in Chap-

el Hill. She brings in the customers but it is the attention to detail and craftsmanship that ultimately sells a house."

The Zinns most recent development is called Claremont. According to Marty Roupe, Carrboro's development review administrator, Carrboro officials expect the north side of town to "urbanize" over time.

"The Claremont plan fits within the context of Carrboro's overall plans for residential development," Roupe said.

If approved by Carrboro's Board of Aldermen, Claremont will connect to the already approved Winmore, a mixed-use development just north of Homestead Road. Claremont, like Larkspur, will include the required number of affordable homes (\$100,000 to \$130,000). According to Roupe, some developers shy away from Chapel Hill and Carrboro because of the affordable housing ordinance, which requires that builders set aside a certain percentage of a project for affordable housing. The Zinns don't have a problem with it.

"They are very creative in meeting the demands of the affordable housing ordinance," Tennyson said. "I think they did an amazing job in Larkspur."

Woodard agrees.

"If you drive through Larkspur, you will not notice the difference in price from one home to the next. They incorporate the same features."