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January/February 2008

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MODULAR

**Patience, Prayers &
Keeping Promises**

PANEL

**Focusing On Green
Construction**

SIP

**Combine Technology,
Training & Teamwork**

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Creative Design & Detailed Craftsmanship

A lifetime of experience in making dream homes a reality has taught this builder that you have to work at improving skills and construction processes.

Many get into the home building industry by following in their father's footsteps, and Nicole Robinson is no exception. Some of her earliest memories are tagging

along with her dad to job sites, helping dig footers and frame walls.

Her father, Charles A. Maney, famously got into the log home industry in 1973

by calling the owner of a log home company—collect—and promising to be the company's No. 1 salesperson if he hired him. He was hired and he delivered on that promise.

In 1989, Maney launched his own company, Log Homes of America (Banner Elk, NC). His daughter joined him in the business in 1994, initially focusing on the production side of the business. But that soon changed when the company launched a separate division, Logs America, for turn-keying homes.

"Formally launching the construction division helped it all come together. When people come to you for a log home package, it's a whole lot easier to sell if you offer construction services. We've seen that with our dealers as well," says Robinson, a licensed general contractor, as well as managing partner of Logs America and vice president of Log Homes of America. "I started managing jobs for my dad while still doing the marketing for Log Homes of America. Then when my dad retired, I took over construction full time."



Nicole Robinson



Today, Robinson oversees construction on a number of upscale, custom log homes each year, from as few as one to as many as eight. "I don't ever want to do eight in a single year again," she says with a laugh. "It's much better to concentrate on two or three at a time. That way you can stagger the construction schedules and keep all the different trades busy."

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FOCUSING ON COMMUNICATION & PLANNING

There are several advantages to being female in a male-dominated industry, Robinson says. Women are often more detail oriented than men. "I've discovered that it's best to spend a lot of time on design, getting to know my clients, their lifestyle and what their expectations are. Since everything we do is custom, you really have to find out how they will use this space and what their daily routines are like. I think that's the challenge for every custom builder. You have to ask all the right questions," she says.



Since many of her clients (about 70%) are from Florida, Robinson says this home will likely be their last. So she often urges her clients to incorporate universal design features so they can age gracefully in place. "This includes making hallways and doorways slightly wider and eliminating stairs whenever possible," says Robinson.

She says to be successful in this business means communicating clearly. This helps allay clients' fears, which are never too far away from every interaction. "Every decision that's made, you have to get it down on paper and have them sign off on it. Because our clients are often in other states, we often email progress photos and other documentation. We give them homework assignments—choices that they have to make to keep the project running smoothly. We try to make the process as easy as possible for them, because making all those decisions can be stressful. I learned that when my husband Joel and I first built our own house."

ADVICE TO OTHERS

■ Return all calls and emails promptly, because clients expect that level of interest when they are spending their life savings on their dream home.

"One of the first sales I made was simply because I was the only one who called them back out of eight companies that they had contacted. The couple was in their early 20s, he was a policeman and she was a teacher, and the other companies wrongfully assumed they didn't have the wherewithal to buy a home. But they had family money and then ended up buying a \$70K package from me and that was a sizeable package 13 years ago," she says.

■ Ask questions and always seek to improve your knowledge and construction processes. "Get your feet wet in the field and obtain a well-rounded education in construction."

■ Be detail oriented and follow through on what you promise to earn good word of mouth.

"My goal going into a project is to treat them better than family. That means to do what you say you will do and work to improve your processes." ■

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