



Steve Barkhouse
Amsted Construction

Steve's values come first

And the rest just seems to follow

By Francie Healy

It's hard to know where to start with Steve Barkhouse. You might know him as president and co-owner of Amsted Design/Build. Or you might have read about him as Renovator of the Year, simply because he has won the award so many times.

But how do you describe him?

There isn't one word to sum him up. A dozen couldn't do it.

But if you were to try, you'd probably

say, right off the bat, words like this: Energetic. Principled. Caring. Upbeat. Team member. Devoted to family. Focused. Perfectionist. Healthy. Young. Enthusiastic. Confident. Natural. Easy to talk to. Articulate. Driven. Good listener. Great with people.

Most of all, however, you'd pick up on the word "principled".

This is a guy who knows so well what he wants and expects, not just of himself

but of everyone who works for him, that he has drawn up a list of Core Values, had them printed on laminated business cards, and carries one in his wallet.

The core values (along with company vision and mission statements) are also on a poster in the room where he, his business partner and the staff have regular meetings.

They're simple, one-sentence statements about things like integrity, teamwork, respect, trust, empathy, loyalty. If a thorny question comes up in staff meetings, it's bound to fall under one of those core values, and it gets answered accordingly.

Steve doesn't know for sure where he learned these values, but he suspects it simply comes from being part of a good family. He was an only child, raised on the very property where Amsted Design/Build and its sister company, Restore-All, sit, in the actual barn beside the farmhouse where his parents still live.

"Barn" might give you a false impression. It now looks like a (very, very clean) barn on the outside. But when you walk in the door it takes your breath away for a moment. You look up – way, way up – to the rafters. And you see beautiful woodwork, railings, stairways, windows, soft natural light. This old barn is a renovation miracle.

Steve learned work habits from his parents and grandparents. His mother is a retired teacher. His dad and two grandfathers were in the construction business. Steve was naturally drawn to the work they did, and spent the better part of his childhood watching, soaking in, being part of, things other kids only read about in books. He was up and down elevators on the outsides of buildings. He was at his grandfather's side when he built his own house. And when he was older, he spent every summer working at a different trade so he could learn. He did everything, even landscaping.

And he learned important life lessons. For instance, his dad and both grandfathers used to tell him over and over: If

you're going to do it, do it right. Also: if you borrow something, return it in better shape than you received it.

He knew from an early age that this was what he was going to do for the rest of his life. He thought it would take the form of house-building. Later that was fine-tuned into renovating, which captivated him.

He went to Algonquin College, where he studied architecture and business. Later he went to Lakehead University and ended up with a degree in business.

He was making a nice chunk of money during those summers when he was doing construction work, and he bought himself a snazzy little sports car.

When he finally graduated and realized the jobs just weren't out there, his father suggested he go into business for himself. But he didn't make it easy.

"Dad said, if you're going to start a

business, I'll help you. But first I'm going to give you a beat-up truck. And the sports car is going to your mother."

It was a hard lesson, but it was real. You can't drive a sports car to construction sites.

His dad has been a constant friend and mentor since 1989, when Steve started his business, until now.

Not long after he began, he and his dad bought a place on Churchill Avenue. They severed it, built a new attached unit, and renovated the house.

"It was so much fun," says Steve, "that I decided I would be a renovator."

There was a tenant in the house at the time, and that was Steve's first experience with customer service. He had to learn how to work around a person and to understand what it felt like to be living in the midst of upheaval.

Since then, Steve and his family have

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been in the midst of their own renovations, so he really knows what it's like. It adds to his empathy with clients as they go through the often-nervewracking renovation process.

When you ask him how he does it – how he manages this large, successful business, constantly wins big awards, and still seems calm and “together”, he's quick to tell you. He has good people, he says. He has a fabulous team. They all win those awards together. He says that a lot. It's clear he's grateful for, and proud of, all of them.

He adds he could never have built up this business if he had started later in life. When he began, he was just a single guy who could work 20 hours a day.

“When you're young,” he says, “You don't realize how little you have to lose.”

He says two of his skills are people-pleasing abilities and an intuitive sense

about people – about how well they'll work together, what kind of integrity they have, and how well they'll fit into the team. He “reads” people well. As a result, he hires the best of the best, not just for their work but for their suitability to the team.

His intuitive sense also makes him a bit of a romantic. He'll talk about how he loves his job and the satisfaction it gives him.

He says his staff teases him when he “waxes poetic”. He'll start to list the things he helps make happen: first kisses on front porches, first Christmas trees in living rooms, driveways for road hockey... But then he stops. “That's so corny,” he says.

But you know he means it. You know it's important.

Although he's a skilled businessman, he breaks what he says is an important rule: he hires and works closely with family

and friends. Cousins work for him; his dad still works with him, and his business partner, Kirk Haw, is his best friend. Kirk is co-owner of Restore-All, which does “disaster response” rescue and restoration work. The two companies share staff and resources.

“Kirk and I have a personal plan,” he says. “Part of our personal plan is how this business helps us achieve that. Page one of our business plan is our personal plan.”

He says the business allows him to follow his personal goals and to do the best he can for his wife, Tracey, and children Vanessa, 12, and Braxton, 8.

“I don't separate the two [business and personal],” Steve says. “If my daughter has a recital in the middle of the day, I'll go to it. If a client needs me at 7 p.m., I'll be there.”

Similarly, Kirk is always on hand to greet his children when they get off the bus from school each day.

It's all part of those rich values they bring to their work. Clients benefit from it, too, whether they realize it or not.

Steve appreciates the “tremendous responsibility” of going into someone's home and literally becoming part of their lives, not only for the six months or so it takes to do the job, but for years afterwards.

“They trust us,” he says. “And we value that trust. We see them in their pyjamas. We see them in the middle of arguments, in battles over homework, in all kinds of family issues. We respect that.”

He says they're “like bartenders – only we come to your home”. People will often confide in them about all sorts of things. But what's said in those walls stays there. Steve sees it as a kind of sacred trust.

He's obviously a successful and clever businessman. But at the heart of Steve Barkhouse there seems to be a deep commitment to the things that matter in life: friendship, family, respect, integrity. Maybe those are all the words anyone needs. ○



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