

Anderson Construction

by Yvonne Pfoutz

Some contractors specialize in commercial, residential, new construction or remodeling, but not Pam Anderson, owner of Anderson Construction near Chambersburg. She averages 23 projects a year; a recent breakdown showed 16 renovation and repair jobs, two new residential (additions and homes), three commercial and two she labels charity.

“Instead of a type of project, I have a type of client,” says Anderson, who recently became chair of the Greater Chambersburg Chamber of Commerce. “My clients are busy professionals—although that doesn’t necessarily mean that both spouses are working outside the home—people who want one-on-one personal service, who are concerned about how a job gets done. They like that someone is on the job every day.

“The last house I built, for eight months I was there every day but three. I like to see my customers everyday and they like me being available and on call. I tell them to call me, even weekends and evenings. I don’t want them to stew over something.

Despite her growing business, Anderson has no employees, handling small projects by herself and subcontracting parts of larger jobs.

“Workforce issues are critical in this area,” she says. “It’s not only difficult to find good people, it’s difficult to find people at all. Construction is not a glamorous profession. The demand [for labor] has made it easier for guys to go out on their own and specialize. Instead of employing people, many contractors now rely on subcontractors.

“I work on one project at a time, so I can give undivided attention to the job. I understand the usual [contractor] mindset is that if you have many people working for you, you have to keep them busy so you have several projects at a time. If outside work is delayed by bad weather, you have inside work to fall back on. For me, if there’s bad weather, I can catch up on my office work in normal hours and not have to do it evenings and weekends.

“The only time that my projects overlap is during new construction. When I’m working with subcontractors, I tell them to give me the jobs they don’t want. If I can’t help them, then I can sometimes break away to do a small job, like plaster repairs.

“I really like remodeling where I can do more hands-on work, especially interior finish work: flooring, trim, dry wall, plaster, painting and papering.”

Anderson builds a new house every other year, and each has been bigger than the one before. The house she’s starting next has 7,000 square feet.

“I spend as much time planning as building a house. My strength is organizing and managing. My subcontractors know I have a schedule. I ask the specialty contractors how much time they’ll need to complete their part, I make a schedule that has the right people in the right place at the right time, and I give people plenty of notice. Sometimes someone new will say, ‘Schedules never last’ and the others will say, ‘Yes, Pam’s will.’”

At the end of a job, customers are given a notebook with warranties, product information, photos of the project in progress, and the names and phone numbers of all the suppliers and specialty contractors.

Anderson’s Web site is equally thorough. In addition to the usual project photos and testimonials, potential customers can find detailed information on the construction process, planning a project, comparing costs and meeting a budget as well as checklists for deciding whether to renovate or build; making environmentally-friendly construction choices; and building homes that are accessible for handicapped or aging residents.

“I’m told I have a reputation for being expensive,” says Anderson. “But I must not be too expensive because I still have work. Forty-four percent of my work is with repeat customers or referrals. I’m now scheduling work for the summer of 2007.

“I think I give value for the dollar. My customers get a detailed contract. They know every cost, my markup, my margin. If we come in under budget, the difference is split 50/50 with the customer. Sometimes we go over because something was added, but that’s covered with a change order. If we go over because of a mistake on my part, I eat the extra cost.”

Because she spends so much time in planning, Anderson charges for estimates on large projects. “I got burned in the past. I put a lot of work into an estimate and then they went with someone else. Now I charge 1% to 3% of the estimated cost but that comes back on the contract. The pre-construction agreement has a detailed cost analysis. I have subcontractors look at the job. I do a preliminary work survey. People understand that they are playing for a service. Now I have other contractors asking me about it.”

“I choose my subcontractors for their dependability, quality and price, in that order. I’ve worked with the drywall hanger since the beginning, the cabinet person since 1992 and the electrician for 10 years. We’re like a company; we know what to expect from each other.

“RWR Construction, my framing contractor, is so good that I’ve added an addendum to my contract that [RWR owner] Roger Horst will assume responsibility for the job if I can’t.”

Anderson also uses current construction technology to keep her jobs on schedule, utilizing pre-cast foundations from Nitterhouse Concrete Products and panelized walls, floor systems, and roof trusses from Foremost Industries, both Franklin County companies.

“This is a faster way to get under-roof,” says Anderson. “Now before we’re even digging the foundation, Nitterhouse is getting the basement walls ready to pour. And while they’re setting those walls, Foremost is working on the [panelized] walls.”

Anderson’s business acumen earned her the Pennsylvania Builder Association’s Small Contractor of the Year award in 2001, just 10 years after she picked up a hammer full-time. Originally a speech pathologist from Illinois, she moved to Franklin County in 1979 when she and her physician husband were hired by the Chambersburg Hospital. In 1986, she was named director of the new speech pathology department at the hospital.

That same year, Anderson and her husband began a five-year renovation of a farmhouse built in 1886. They hired a local contractor but she says, “We still got to do a lot of the fun stuff—plastering, stripping and refinishing trim, painting and papering.”

In 1991, Anderson left her hospital position and formed P&T Construction in partnership with Terry Stinson, whom she credits with teaching her construction skills.

“I had developed our department at the hospital and needed a new challenge. I was fascinated by the construction industry.”

“P&T mostly did remodeling and renovations but we built three houses where we did most of the work ourselves. In the evenings and on weekends, I did the estimating, billing and other paperwork.”

In 1997, she started Anderson Construction, going out on her own in a male-dominated industry. However, she says her gender has never been a problem. “Other contractors have supported me. I had two ‘dads’ who especially helped when I started on my own: the late Henry Stouffer and Marlin Gayman who’s now retired.

“Because I’m female, people hear about me—being on schedule, being detail-oriented—but I know guys in the business who are just as good and don’t get the recognition.”

Along with running her business, Anderson is active in professional and community organizations, including the Franklin County Builders Association, the Pennsylvania Builders Association and Leadership Franklin County.

In January, she began a two-year term as chair of the Greater Chambersburg Chamber of Commerce.

“One goal [as chair] is to continue the cooperation among the Franklin County chambers that I saw during the recent Civil War Trails program. We’ve started a countywide chamber of commerce governmental affairs committee.

“Another area is education, especially the county’s Career and Technical Center. With the unemployment rate so low, we need the technical center to be a prime supplier of graduates for the workforce and for colleges, after which we hope they’ll come back. Our focus is keeping the center as good as it has

been.”

The construction boom in Franklin County continues but Anderson says, “People I work with say, ‘You know it can’t last’ and I agree. Someday, we may not have the amount of work we have now. We must treat our clients as if they are our only job and we have no other work.

“That’s one transferable skill I learned from working at the hospital, the importance of customer service.”

About the author:

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