

B CAPITAL REGION **BUILDING**

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2007

2007 Custom Builder GUIDE

Vasiliou Homes
brings a woman's touch
to custom home building

At any one time there are at least 400 companies in the greater Capital/Saratoga/Lake George Region that build homes. The leaders of these companies come in different shapes and sizes. They come from various ethnic backgrounds. They have individual temperaments and differing levels of education, experience and expertise. What they don't do is come from different genders.

In my 15 years of observing the region's home building industry, I have had the opportunity to meet several women who play key roles and sometimes partner with their husbands within a homebuilding company. But they do not lead the company and they are not builders per se. It is a male-dominated industry.

In those 15 years I have heard of five women leading homebuilding companies. One and maybe two of these companies are no longer in business, so it is fair to say that less than 1% of Capital Region home builders are women.

One of them, and a very capable one at that, is Christine Vasiliou Zientak, owner of Vasiliou Homes, Inc. currently based in Queensbury, New York. Her capability is a matter of public record. When she made her Saratoga Builders Showcase of Homes debut in 2005 she took away awards in eight of the nine categories as chosen by a panel of industry judges. This was no fluke. In 2006 she did even better. She won first or second place awards in all seven categories — with the lowest priced home in the competition. Moreover, she also won "The People's Choice" award voted on by members of the public who visit all the houses in the Showcase. Chris's approach to the Showcase was the same as it is for every house she builds: "Let's think about what we can do and do it with the premise that you don't have to pay five or six hundred thousand dollars to have a nice home."

ONE AFTERNOON in the comfort of one of her award-winning homes, Chris discussed with me how she came to be where she is today:



Story by Craig Stevens
Photos by Randall Perry Photography



The 2006 award-winning Saratoga Showcase home

Her father, Michael J. Vasiliou, was a career-long industrial arts and mechanical drawing teacher. In 1961 he began building homes in Clifton Park as a sideline, first in partnership with developer/Realtor Jeffrey Christiana, and ultimately on his own. Chris said her dad wasn't in it for money: "He was happy if he came out even at the end of a year." When Michael Vasiliou retired from teaching in 1990 he established his company as a full-time building firm in the Queensbury area.

ON THE COVER: The formal dining room in Vasiliou's 2006 Saratoga Showcase of Home entry. Interior design of the 2006 home by Liberty-Hughes Designs. Photo © Randall Perry Photography.

In the 1980s Chris attended college and then graduate school. First she acquired a BA in economics and then an MBA in finance, both from Russell Sage. During these years Chris enjoyed working with her dad during vacations and summers. She painted, varnished and installed insulation. As her education progressed she began to apply it by helping her dad with his business and computer systems.

Upon graduation, Chris began an upward career in the management of boards of realtors. She started in Warren County, New York and then relocated to Massachusetts for three years. Then, still in her twenties, she was recruited to head a staff of 36 as the executive officer of the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors.

After about three years she began to talk with her father about returning home to work with him. At first he didn't think it would work out. Several months elapsed before he agreed and she came home to a big surprise: after a month on the job her parents decided to take an extended vacation, leaving Chris in charge. Trial by fire. Chris proved herself and about five years later she bought the company from her father.

Today, Chris says "I get up thinking about work, I go to bed thinking about work. I love it. [But] there was a time when I hated it. We were doing too many houses at one time, they weren't progressing as I wanted, there were tensions coming from every direction. But I counted my blessings and I got past it."

The blessings include having her Baltimore-bred husband, Brian, a teacher, very happy in his new surroundings. They include having a home office so she can be present when her two small children, Nora and David need her. They include being around family and friends and working with people she likes. Moreover, Chris says that “When I worked behind a desk I couldn’t measure my accomplishments, but now I can drive down the road and see something I built ten years ago.”

SOMETIMES A good source of insight into a builder is the people with whom a builder routinely works. Here are three examples:

Rich Pennock, of Pennock’s Kitchens and Baths: “Chris has a personal touch as far as the theme of the home, colors and the way things should come together. And she does a very good job with construction; she uses all quality materials. She works very well with us when sitting down to discuss a project or bills. She is thorough and makes sure everything is finalized. ... [And as a woman who works in a kitchen herself] she knows what a woman wants in her kitchen.”

Peter Thane of Stock Building Supply: “I am thrilled to see Chris succeeding in an industry typically dominated by men. I am ecstatic that she has been so successful with her Showcase homes. She has knowledge of the industry, business savvy and a firm grasp of subs, her labor force, her staff. I am impressed with her ability to move things along in a timely fashion. She is a great person and an absolute pleasure to deal with.”

Scott Varley, Realty USA: “Chris is easygoing and great to work with. She has a lot of compassion, the feminine aspect. She brings nurturing warmth to her customers and to the building trade. Customers are surprised to see a woman builder — pleasantly surprised. [In my opinion,] women account for 90% of the decision making [when buying a new home] and they react positively to her. Some men are at first concerned whether or not she knows her trade



The 2006 Showcase home’s master bedroom

— the macho thing — but they soon learn that she knows her stuff.”

AND, INDEED SHE does know her stuff. I asked her several questions about her method of building and the materials she uses. In return I got wide-ranging discourses about design matters (exteriors and floor plans) and why she chooses to use certain brands of products,

engineered lumber, panelized walls (fast enclosure, precision, saves time and money). She talked about engineering issues, maintenance concerns and the importance of energy efficiency. Her reasoning was sound and if I had been giving her a test in comparison with the many other builders I have interviewed she would have passed with honors. *(continued)*



The 2006 Saratoga Showcase home’s kitchen

VASILIOU HOMES *At-A-Glance*

Founder: Michael J. Vasiliou (1961)
Principal: Christine Vasiliou Zientak (since 2000)
Services: Custom homes, Semi-custom homes, some remodeling
Service area: Warren and Saratoga counties
Professional Affiliations: Saratoga Builders Association, Builders Association of Northern New York, New York State Builders Association, National Association of Home Builders
Telephone: (518) 798-9271
Web Site: www.vasiliouhomes.com
Realtor: Scott Varley (Realty USA)



The 2006 Saratoga Showcase home's great room



The 2005 award-winning Saratoga Showcase home



The 2005 Saratoga Showcase home's kitchen



The 2005 Saratoga Showcase home's master bath

Chris is "market savvy." She builds 8 to 10 homes a year in what is typically called a "move-up" niche. By most standards, she moves fast. Usually 4 to 5 months elapse between contract and closing. She is currently building in a 45-site subdivision in Moreau (called Rivercrest Estates) as well as on individual lots in both Saratoga and Warren Counties. She has a portfolio of 18 homes for the subdivision, but builds fully custom homes as well. Usually, she works in concert with the Saratoga-based design firm, Dreamscapes.

An admitted multi-tasker, Chris is not a desk-bound, conduct-business-by-phone manager. She says: "I go to every job every day. Nobody treats the business like the owner does." When it comes to

working with her customers, Chris says "I am going to be a partner with my customers. When I get a customer, I am tied to them for at least seven years" (the warranty period). If the home they are building will not likely be their final home, she will emphasize thinking about eventual re-sale. If it is likely to be their permanent residence, she will suggest different amenities and decorating schemes.

In essence, she provides "a personal touch. Most of the time I am here on the weekends with my sales agents, guiding people through the process. This is such a huge undertaking for most people. Every customer has a level of need, how comfortable they are doing it. Some people need more help and guidance than others do. We don't

have the design centers that some of the bigger builders have, but we have plenty of samples and complete access to our suppliers."

Chris doesn't mind being branded as a woman builder. In fact she embraces it. She recognizes that with her background and her education coupled with her feminine perspective she brings a unique mix to her profession. "I am a woman in an industry where there are very few women," she says. "I can make that work for me and for my customers."

RESOURCES

- Liberty Hughes Designs** - interior design
- Quality Roofing & Siding Supplies** - roofing, siding
- Stock Building Supply** - building materials