

# Dusty Waldrop is continuing a family tradition while making his own way.

*by James A. Bernsen*

When Dusty Waldrop decided to get into the homebuilding business, he didn't have to search too hard for a mentor: his father Aaron Waldrop has been developing residential communities in Abilene, Texas for nearly a decade.

"Dad approached me one day about learning the business. He didn't have to ask me twice", the younger Waldrop said. "I saw the successes he was having and I always wanted to own my own business since I was a little boy, I just never knew what it was going to be. I viewed this as an opportunity to continue a family tradition."

Dusty is no stranger to family traditions. He graduated from the same high school, Abilene Wylie, as his father and grandfather. Family tradition is so important to him that he recently had the opportunity to name his first born son "Preston Carl" honoring the child's two grandfathers.

Given his father's building experience, one would think working as a builder would seem to be a natural choice for Waldrop. On the contrary, the course was anything but a straight line.

"Getting into the building business was a slow process for me by choice," Waldrop said. "Since graduating from the University of Texas with an Economics degree in 1993, I worked different jobs around the real estate and concrete industry wanting to learn the construction business from various aspects."

"I saw commercial, industrial, and residential projects go from planning to completion and was always intrigued by the finished product. I also witnessed what dad was doing by taking raw land and creating new communities for families to call home."

Once Dusty made the decision, he took the plunge and followed his father's footsteps by forming his own company.



"It was an opportunity for me to start my own business with my father's lead," Waldrop said. "He'd made some bad decisions in the beginning and I felt he could help me from making similar mistakes with my business."

After learning the ropes in West Texas, Dusty did one thing different: he moved his business to the tough, but growing market in Central Texas. The transition wasn't too hard for Waldrop, he and his wife Rebecca, a pharmaceutical lobbyist; felt this was the best decision for their family and their home building business.

Waldrop jumped right in to the Austin market, focusing on larger, 2,500-5,000 square-foot homes. His plan included getting noticed right away through the Parade of Homes sponsored by the Home Builders Association of Austin.

"I was driving down City Park Road one afternoon and found Greenshores on Lake Austin by accident. The subdivision was brand new and was going to be featured in the 2004 Parade of Homes," he said. "My wife





and I felt this was the perfect opportunity to move our business to Austin and get the necessary exposure. I'd always thought about how I was going to do that....the timing could not have been better" Waldrop states.

And so, the first house Dusty built in Austin he entered into the Parade and has a second home about 50 percent complete in the same subdivision. A third home just broke ground and he expects to start a fourth after the first of the year.

**T**hat's about all the business Waldrop wants right now. He's a one-man operation, and prefers it that way. It also adheres to his philosophy about building that puts quality over quantity.

"My main goal is to build the quality and not the quantity," he said. "I don't want to over extend myself. Four to five homes per year are fine with me."

These are all lessons he learned from his father.

"Dad is very hands-on," Waldrop said. "When he's developing, he personally negotiates the purchase. When building a house, he's active in the design stage, he manages all the subcontractors, and he sells the house. What I learned from him is that if you're going to control your business and run a tight ship, you have to pay attention to the details. When you lose sight of the details, you tend to lose control of your business, and when a person loses control of his business...it's over!!"

"Dad has done a tremendous job keeping a small operation simple by managing everything personally. I think what I learned from him was to just be there daily and watch everything."

Dusty Waldrop doesn't look for a style or for features that defines a house as a Waldrop house. What he does look for are new products and technologies to make a house unique.

"I enjoy visiting with my suppliers about new products and new technologies in the market that I can incorporate in my next home. Things that will be reasonable in cost and things the homeowner's would embrace," he said. "I am looking for fixtures, paint finishes, anything that people haven't seen. I also want to understand the newest products available that would help a homeowner reduce their energy bill. Anything I can do to make a better home for the consumer while keeping our cost down."

Some of the things Dusty does in the construction of a house aren't always noticed by the homeowner, but he knows it is the little steps that make the difference between an ordinary house and a great house.



"The thing that makes me sleep better at night is when the homeowner moves in, I know I have built a quality home by paying attention to the details that matter most," he said.

**H**is latest home is a Mediterranean, Tuscan-style house designed by Austin architect Elliot Johnson. The 3,700 square-foot, two-story home features plenty of open space, including a large great room, a family area off the kitchen, a butler's pantry, and a master suite secluded from the rest of the house.



"It's has a very open feel in each room," Waldrop said.

Waldrop and Johnson also worked together to create a house that could make use of a spectacular lot.

"We tried to take advantage of the existing landscape," he said. "The lot came with 27 oak trees, and I wanted to keep as many as possible. We lost a few, but Elliott really helped in giving us a house that took advantage of the natural beauty."

It also has a number of unique and innovative features, like a plasma television on a motorized retractable lift which is hidden in an elegant cabinet when not in use.



"One of the reasons we wanted to hide the television was the many large oak trees that could be viewed from the kitchen, breakfast, wet bar, and family area. With the proper amount of windows, and some creativity, I knew we could have a dual-purpose room. When the plasma is inside the cabinet, this area of the house can be extremely peaceful for the homeowner. With the push of a button, a 48" plasma television appears and the same area becomes the center of entertainment for a family and their guests."



Another unique feature built into the bathroom is a pedicure sink in the master shower, which to Waldrop's knowledge is the first ever sold in Austin.

"The homeowner can get a foot massage every night when they come home," Waldrop said.

There's also a play area upstairs, a children's reading room, and special plaster in the master bedroom that is functional as well as inviting - because it's lime-based, the walls are resistant to mold spores.

Waldrop also incorporated rain chains to the front of the house. "Aesthetically they blend in well with the Tuscan theme I was trying to adhere to, and they are functional downspouts as well."

"These are the types of things that I rely on my suppliers and subcontractors to share with me that will make my house just a little bit different," he said.

The house also includes a wet bar with a specially-painted mural, featuring an Italian-style hillside scene with farmhouses.

**T**he biggest challenge for any new builder is finding the right subcontractors and tradesmen. With his experience in the industry before he became a builder, and with his father's connections with the national suppliers, Waldrop had some in roads. But he also wasn't afraid to ask for help from local builders.

"I like to get referrals. The builders I have built with in the Parade have all been extremely nice and helpful in that regard, and it's been an invaluable source for me," Waldrop said. "I've weeded out a few [subcontractors] of the bad ones and have put together a good group to go forward with. The second house in Austin is definitely going much smoother than the first one now that I've got an efficient team in place."

When choosing subcontractors and tradesmen, Waldrop continues his focus on quality above all else. That sometimes makes it a little harder to find the right team, but he says the result is worth the effort.



He also credited the Homebuilder's Association with providing assistance.

Waldrop's company is less than five years old, and feels very confident in its growth in the coming years. He intends to continue his focus on the luxury market. He believes the trends in that Austin economy will allow him to keep working within 10-15 miles of downtown Austin - just where he wants to be.

Being in close proximity to downtown allows me to concentrate on the buyers that do not want to fight the daily commute into Austin. These buyers enjoy the city for its lifestyle choices, and Waldrop wants to provide them a luxurious home close to downtown and Lake Austin.

"You will never find me stretched throughout town," he said. "I enjoy operating a small operation and I am most comfortable at the jobsite, which means I want to be in one, maybe two subdivisions."

"I can't really build the quality of home that I want to build if two-thirds of my day is spent driving between projects," he said. "I want to be at the jobsite when the work is being done. I want to see that a quality house is being built, and in order for me to do that, I have to be present. And in order for me to make a presence at each jobsite, I feel this is best achieved by limiting the amount of driving distance between each project."

He has bought ten lots in the Greenshores on Lake Austin subdivision, and says he will probably build all ten out before he moves on to another subdivision. The subdivision, he said, is a great place to build his kind of home. It has private access to Lake Austin, and it's only 10 minutes from downtown - perfect for the people who want the privacy and luxury of a custom home on the lake - but the easy access to the city.

In building his business, Dusty Waldrop believes strongly in the old maxim: Luck is when hard work and preparation meets opportunity.

"I think that's basically what happened," he said. "I've been working real hard; I've been preparing myself for success, and the opportunity at Greenshores came about with the Parade and I just jumped on it. Having a supportive wife doesn't hurt either."