

Donnie Blake in his office in Morrisville.



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DONNIE BLAKE

‘I like a down-to-earth, handshake person, one who gives us creative freedom’

Born in Burlington and raised in Lamoille County, Donnie Blake is the president of Donald P. Blake Jr. Inc., a construction company based in Morrisville—its website is stowebuilder.com—which he founded in January 1985. This year marks the company’s 35th anniversary. He lives in Morrisville with his wife, Julie. They have two grown children, Lindsay, 31, who works for National Life Group, and Jonathon, 28, a project manager for the construction company. >>

How did you get your start in the construction industry?

I graduated from Peoples Academy in 1973 and worked for a local construction company in Stowe owned by Clint Thompson. I did a lot of commercial work for him and really liked it. I did not go to college, but instead, learned as I got paid. After a while, I wanted to get back to my first love, which is wood, and worked for John Gregg at Butternut Construction. From there I worked for Tomas C. Bjerke for five years. That's when I decided if I was going to work that hard, I would work for myself. Interestingly, Tom Bjerke has been working for me for the past six years as executive supervisor.

What is your company's scope of work?

Our forte is high-end custom residential construction and also some light commercial. We did Stowe Bowl and are currently working on MSI, tying together two buildings with a 62,000-square-foot footprint. We've done homes up to 12,000 square feet and are currently doing a large home in Robinson Springs in Stowe. We usually have three or four large homes in the works, plus a number of small projects, renovations, and small commercial. Right now we are working on the old TD bank in Waterbury. We call it The Vault, for obvious reasons.

Do you travel for projects?

Our normal span is a 25-mile radius, but we have gone as far as Isle La Motte. When I see something challenging, I'm drawn to it. The house in Isle la Motte was for Aldo Bensadoun, owner of Aldo Group, a retail shoe company based in Montreal. It is quite the structure.

How many employees do you have?

We vary from about 32 to 37. Four are full-time office support, three are project managers, my son Jonathon is our primary estimator and project manager, and we have five on-site supervisors. The rest make up the construction crew. We also do property services, which is basically annual maintenance. We do a program for clients for whom we built homes.

Do you offer any benefits for your employees?

We pay a percentage of their health insurance and we have a 401k program. We also have a profit-sharing plan that goes into the 401ks. We provide six paid holidays and are willing to be flexible about personal time. We try to accommodate our staff's personal needs. Our staff works 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and Friday 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. If someone needs to make up hours, they can do it on Friday afternoons. We have a low turnover rate and some people have been with us over 20 years.

What are your strengths as owner of the company?

I am diplomatic and I have a lot of common sense. I work well with people. I have almost 50 years in construction and have seen incredible changes.

What are some of those changes?

Everything used to be labor. Today we do everything with equipment, both heavy equipment and smaller hand-held tools. We've gone from hammers to battery-powered pneumatic nailers. The equipment these days makes work easier and safer. Now we are much more aware of safety and personal protective gear and we hold annual safety days. One of the biggest changes in the last 10 years is energy-efficiency construction methods. The typical R value used to be R13. Now it's anywhere from R60 to 80 in ceilings and typically R32 to 40 and beyond in wall cavities. We've also seen huge changes in synthetic and recycled products.

Do you do any custom woodworking?

We have a custom woodworking space and we like to do specialty things—vanities, furniture, specialty milling, custom details. We don't usually do custom kitchens because it ties up the shop for too long.



GLENN CALLAHAN

Some of the projects of Donald P. Blake Jr. Inc.

What is a favorite house you built?

Oh my, there have been so many good ones, but to pick one it would be the Bridge House in Stowe. We built that at an important time in my life. It was early on in my career and a challenging project. We had to come up with custom means and methods. It's a covered bridge house that spans a brook. It was unique, but so Vermont. The project was done using local products as much as possible.

What is your favorite type of client?

I like a down-to-earth, handshake person, who is willing to give us creative freedom, but I really enjoy working with all types of clients. I like stepping back and seeing what we were able to do with our hands and our heads. It's important for all players—owner, architect, designer, construction crew, contractors—to walk away feeling good.

Do you still bang nails?

No, but I do an occasional project in the woodworking shop. We have a good team here. The company can run on its own.

You are 65. Do you have a succession plan?

I want the company to continue when I'm gone. I've built a reputation on quality work at a fair price. I wanted to bring on someone younger, and in 1991 Travis Cutler came on board. I could see so much of myself in Travis. He studied construction management at Vermont Technical College, and over time he worked his way up to partner and is currently the vice president. In order to make it work, I wanted him to have ownership and shares in the company, to have skin in the game. Now I'm trying to do the same with my son, Jonathon. Both are way more tech-savvy than I, which is a huge advantage today. We have shareholder agreements and we are very open with each other.

What is your community involvement?

I am the advancement chair for Boy Scouts and an assistant scoutmaster. I know Boy Scouts are getting bad press from things that happened 30 years ago, but it is much different now. I really enjoy the cause. I get to see boys learn to be good community members and leaders. I also coached softball for Lindsay's team when she was younger. It was as much therapy for me as it was coaching. I found I could completely forget about work when I was coaching. I'm a past president of Associated General Contractors of Vermont and have been on the executive board for 10 years. The company has helped out with Habitat for Humanity and we donated time to convert a house to wheelchair-accessible for a war veteran. I like to volunteer for things that have to do with kids and seniors. ■