

PROFILE: BUILDING THE DREAM



By Matt Alderton

In 2010, Ron Ruttan embarked on a major home-improvement project after he decided to build a garage on the side of his Kingston, Ont., home. What was supposed to be a simple garage quickly became an elaborate, 1,600-square-foot addition that included a carport, an adjacent workshop and a second-story living space, which includes a bathroom and an extra family room complete with cathedral ceilings and a fireplace.

After a year and a half of work, Ruttan finished the project in early 2012. When he did, he not only ended up with a new garage. Thanks to an epiphany he had during the project, he also had a new livelihood.

"I got some estimates from other contractors when I first decided to build the garage, and it would have cost me in the neighborhood of \$200,000 to have someone else do it," says Ruttan, who saved about \$20,000 to \$30,000 serving as his own contractor. "I had the luxury of doing it myself, and that's when I realized, 'I can do this for a career and make a living at it.'"

Now, Ruttan is doing exactly that. In September 2011, he quit his day job and started RDR Building Services, a residential remodeling and renovation company that specializes in high-end carpentry—including hardwood, decks and trim—and can remodel all areas of a home, including basements, bathrooms and kitchens.

On the flip side

Although it's less than a year old, RDR Building Services has been 43 years in the making, says Ruttan, who learned how to use tools—and the value of a strong work ethic—from his grandfather, a World War II veteran and hobby farmer. Ruttan began mastering his craft by working with his grandfather on projects around the farm.

"I grew up in the country, where everybody has some kind of trade," Ruttan says. "My grandfather was a farmer—a [Royal Canadian] Navy guy—and he taught me most of what I know."

Ruttan is now 43, but he started his first construction company at 16.

"As soon as I was old enough to drive, I had my own renovation business," he says, recalling an adolescence spent behind the wheel of a pick-up truck, driving between jobs to build decks, install windows and remodel interiors for his clients, many who were his high school teachers.

Upon graduating high school, Ruttan enrolled at Queen's University in Kingston with a goal of studying education. Ultimately, though, the pull of the trades proved stronger than that of the classroom.

"I showed up to the university driving my pick-up truck and wearing cowboy boots," Ruttan says. "I didn't really fit in. So, after about two years, I left and pursued a millwright trade, which is a fief of all the trades—metal, steel, welding and pipefitting."

Ruttan spent more than a decade as a millwright for DuPont Canada, the Canadian arm of the American chemical company. The set-up was ideal for Ruttan. He was able to continue pursuing his construction hobby because he did shift work at DuPont, which meant he only worked 15 days a month. He had the freedom to build, and took full advantage.

In fact, he built his first house when he was 21. Then, he took his love for construction and turned it into a business. Along with his wife and a business partner, he has acquired 60 rental properties and flipped eight houses over the past 22 years.

"I worked for DuPont Canada as a millwright for 14 years, but all along I was buying and flipping houses," Ruttan says. "It's always been a part-time business for me."

From entrepreneur to educator—and back

In 2003, Kingston's Limestone District School Board hired Ruttan as coordinator of the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), a youth-to-work program that allows high school juniors and seniors to learn a skilled trade as a registered apprentice while still in school. Ruttan ran the program for eight years, growing it from a program that graduated four apprentices every year to one that graduated up to 60.

"I was hired as a tradesperson to promote the trades," Ruttan says. "The Limestone District School Board is nationally known as a school board that builds houses. While I was there, we built more than 70 homes and a 20,000-square-foot church, too."

Ruttan had great success as an educator, but his entrepreneurial spirit led him away from the program in 2011, when he decided to try to run his own business full time. That's when he started RDR Building Services, which is a play on his initials and his company's promise of "Renovations Done Right."

Building a strong relationship

All contractors know too well how often they have to run to their local hardware or supplies store for building materials. As it turns out, the timing was just right for Ruttan and his new business. In 2011, a new Lowe's store—the city's first—opened in Kingston.

"I first met Ron last summer in the lumber department, assisting him with a purchase," says Simon Moon, commercial sales specialist at the Kingston Lowe's. "We started chatting, and as soon as I found out he had a business, I informed him of our Commercial Services. We opened his account that morning."

During that first meeting, Moon helped Ruttan save \$300 to \$400 on decking. Ruttan brought plans for the project in to the Lowe's store. They both sat down, priced out the amount of lumber Ruttan would need, and Moon had everything approved and delivered within 24 hours, Ruttan says.

Since then, Ruttan has been a regular Lowe's customer. "Ron or someone from RDR is usually in the store daily—sometimes twice daily," Moon says. "Ron has bought everything from plumbing to tools and even some [special order] items."

RDR participates in the Lowe's Volume Discount Pricing program, allowing Ruttan to save more money by buying a larger amount of materials. These savings help attract and retain customers because they're passed on to RDR's clients.

"I don't mark up my materials," Ruttan says. "I make my money on my labor. The volume pricing allows me to make my customers happy because I pass my savings on to the homeowner."

Another Lowe's program—Lowe's Accounts Receivable (LAR)—has proven to be particularly helpful for Ruttan because it gives RDR a revolving line of credit.

"I have one employee, and he's on my account," Ruttan says. "If we're at a job and he needs to grab something, he can put it on the account."

Ruttan's sole employee is a former OYAP student, as are many Lowe's employees. As a result, the store functions more as a partner than a vendor.

"Ron and his team at RDR working together with Lowe's is a great example of how both companies benefit from relationship building," Moon says. "Myself and the commercial team feel Ron is as much a part of our team as we are of his."

Thanks in part to its relationship with Lowe's, Ruttan's business is booming.

"It's very difficult to keep up, but I've been cautious not to grow the business too large too fast," he says. "My goal is to build it slow but build it steady. I'd like to add a couple employees over the next year and eventually have a fleet of guys. My ultimate goal is to build a few spec houses every year. I want to build a few homes every year the way I want to build them, then put them up for sale. That's where I see myself going."

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