

Visionary BUILDERS

A Passion For Perfection

By Jim Brumm

Robert De Wan, owner of Visionary Builders in Santa Rosa, is great bear of a man, quick to smile, quick to laugh. Growing up in Rohnert Park he admits he was the class clown, causing trouble for his teachers and amusement for his fellow students. In high school he took an aptitude test and was told he was meant to be an electrical engineer.

After high school Robert's friend said, "Let's join the Air Force," so they did. Robert became a weapons mechanic, working on F4 fighter planes. After the Air Force Robert said he "got out and floundered for a few years." He worked in malls, sold shoes, worked as a cook and even did a

two-year stint as a commercial fisherman. At one point he took a job going door to door as a Culligan Man. One day, he said, he knocked on a door and met his wife, Sherrie. But let's back up.

While growing up, besides clowning around in class, Robert always had an affinity for working with his hands; consequently he took lots of woodshop and metal shop classes. After his father had a major heart attack and became housebound for 11 years, when work needed to be done around the house, Robert did it under his father's tutelage. "When a switch went bad he'd show me what to do and I'd do it," said Robert. "I learned to fix water heaters, paint walls, fix doors and anything else that needed doing. I remodeled our entire bathroom at fourteen and I built a deck. It made me handy."

Robert took this skill and applied it wherever he worked, no matter what kind of job it was. "At my jobs I would build shelving and racks in the offices or the stores," he said. "I was always in sales but usually ended up building stuff."

One day a friend of Robert's, who was an insulator, asked Robert if he'd like to join the union. The money seemed good so Robert took a few classes and found work in asbestos abatement. Over time he became a journeyman insulator, then worked as an electrician.

Later he found a job working for Medtronics as a facilities technician, or, as Robert put it, laughing, "A well-paid handyman!" At Medtronics he did sheetrock, learned welding and braising; his handyman skills—his construction skills—became more honed. Then he was laid off.

Robert decided to start his own handyman business. His previous co-workers, who had seen the quality of his work and knew he was trustworthy and dependable, began to call him for their own projects and to send him referrals. His business grew. Robert knew it was time to take the next step. He studied for and received his contractor's license. Originally he had called his business De Wan Construction, but with his license he opted for a change and his reasons say a lot about the man.

"Everybody with a truck has the word construction in their name," he said. "When I passed the contractor's test I was



Visionary Builders owner
Robert De Wan



Robert De Wan with granddaughter, Kira Bleu

elated. Wow, I thought, I'm a contractor . . . but what does that mean to me?" Knowing he would have employees he considered the name carefully. "I wanted the name to have value even after I passed it on," he said. "It's not all about me; I wanted others to feel they were a part of it too, not just working for a company with my name." And so Visionary Builders became his company's name.

Robert is a storyteller. If you ask him about his business, odds are he'll answer with a story. Smiling and leaning forward in his chair, he uses stories to illustrate his passion and the satisfaction he feels with each well-done job. He told of a job he performed for an elderly lady who needed her garage fixed. As he cleaned things to prepare for the job, he noticed that there was plumbing that was done incorrectly, with the ends of pipes ill-capped and unsightly. "I'd like to fix this for you," he told his client. He did, and didn't charge her for the extra work. "That's the way I work," he said. "I do it right and I'll take the extra step. When I work for an older woman, I treat her as if she were my own mother."

This commitment to his clients' well-being is what sets Robert apart from most contractors. He is absolutely determined to make sure the job is done right, even if it means making less money. "As a handyman I used to hear horror stories about contractors," said Robert. "I've had people who were scared to hire me because they'd been scammed in the past. When I hear a story like that it sends me through the roof." He paused, glanced at his wife and added, "Sometimes I'll cut my prices to make up for the other guy's mistakes." Sherrie rolled her eyes, smiled and nodded.

"Bob comes home all excited about every job," she said. "He loves to do walk-throughs with clients at the end of the job. He says he

likes to 'soothe their soul.' He even hires a housekeeping staff to clean after his jobs so it's perfect when the client sees it for the first time."

Since starting Visionary Builders, Robert's reputation has grown along with his list of happy, satisfied customers. He has become a member of the Redwood Empire Remodeler's Association as well as the Construction Specification Institute, an organization that sets up standards in blueprint technology for architects and engineers. Robert is also one of just 14 service providers for Bosch Tankless Water Heaters. "I'm proud of that," said Robert, "because I didn't seek it out. They heard about my work and approached me."

He was recently certified as a building performance technician by the California Building Performance Specifications Institute. Clearly, his reputation for quality workmanship and customer service has caught the eye of the industry and customers are talking about him.

Today, Robert is able to handle pretty much any building or construction project his clients may need. He specializes in electrical work (including LED lighting), carpentry, stone work, tile, concrete and sheetrock. He can remodel your kitchen or bath, he can build an addition, he can (and will) fix a simple light switch. No job is too large or too small. "I think of myself as a problem solver," said Robert. "Tell me what you are trying to accomplish and I'll find a way to make it happen."

But construction skills aside, Robert's real magic stems from his warmth, his caring attitude toward his clients, his passion for perfection and a philosophy that compels him to treat clients as he would his own family, and to treat their homes as if they were his own home. Robert takes the time to listen, and knows how to ask leading questions to help his clients clarify their vision—to learn what they *really* want. And then he makes it happen.

"The best thing," said Robert, smiling, "is when a client sees my work and tells me, 'Wow, Robert, it's so much better than I expected!' When I can gain their trust and bring a smile to their face, it makes it all worthwhile."

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