

## **Beverly Henry: Visioneering her way to excellence in home building**

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Winding through the scenic streets of Sugarloaf Country Club and The River Club where Beverly Henry Distinctive Homes are exclusively built north of Atlanta, Benjamin Disraeli's words come to mind: "There is magic in beautiful buildings that exercise an irresistible influence over the minds of humans."

From house to house, Beverly's creations of luxurious massive colonials and classically elegant sprawling traditionals bearing her distinctive trademark detail tell a story—a story about the builder herself, with an eye that is ever in search of beauty, and with the hands and creative mind that makes the dreams of her homebuyers a reality. Included in that story is the theme of excellence—that high quality standards are not only a destination, but a journey which began years ago with a vision for a preferred future, in contrast to the world as it is.

Clearly, Beverly Henry has spent her life visioneering her future into what it has become, and what it will continue to be—not only for herself, but also for her homeowners. Even a cursory tour of her exquisite million dollar-plus homes reveals that her standards for excellence in creativity, materials, and construction awarded her with the invitation from Crescent Resources to build in Sugarloaf and The River Club. Crescent Resources has held the bar high as to standards of development and integrity of the other builders who were also invited to build there. Beverly's company has been building in both country clubs since their inception, three years ago.

Talking with Beverly as she shares the heartbeat of her company means listening to a true visioneer. "I begin by visualizing the final product, and then take it to that—and beyond. I like to create different things, not something that anyone else has, things you don't see in every home. When I drive down the street twenty years from now, I want to look at the homes I built and be

proud of my work, point it out and say, 'I did that.' I build homes that will last for generations to come, not only because of their quality, but because of their timeless beauty."

Beverly's drive for excellence is grounded in her core belief that buying a home is one of the largest investments people make in a lifetime, and she wants to provide solid value for those investments. "My reputation is founded on what I do, and how long it lasts—which means everything to me. It's the most valuable thing I have as a builder."

When Beverly first started building in The River Club, she knew it was going to be people's first impression of her, and would be the only home she had there for customers to look at. "I am particularly proud of that home, and things we had to overcome to achieve certain design details. I overdid my own creative ideas!" If someone tells Beverly that something can't be done, she never believes it. "A heating and air man told me something couldn't be done, and he dropped down a pipe in the terrace level. I didn't notice it until we were hanging sheetrock. Today, we're tearing the sheetrock out and making them move the pipe so it doesn't ruin the appearance of the lower terrace foyer. There's no reason to have a tray there. My floor structural people are just making it happen. I could have just left that pipe there and slapped up some sheetrock—but those are the kinds of things we do to make a difference and achieve the ultimate vision we have for our homes."

Beverly's values about excellence in home building have extended into excellence in customer service—and have resulted in building personal friendships with many of her homeowners. And, Beverly Henry Distinctive Homes offers services and details that other companies do not. "Our strongest feature is our attention to quality standards and detail. And not forgetting the customer after we've closed the sale. I've made friendships with a lot of my customers; I even travel with some of my homeowners. A really close friend is one of my first custom homes built; they have a home in Orlando with a suite just for me!" Beverly says she doesn't collect testimonials from homebuyers anymore. "My friendships with so many of my customers are the best testimonials I could want. I'm able to call my customers and ask if I can show their house, and they say yes."

Her son Jimmy, vice president of Beverly Henry Distinctive Homes, takes ongoing courses to keep current with building trends, materials and codes, along with Beverly. She said that she

and her son also learn a great deal through the Gwinnett inspections. She is an active member of the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association and has served as a board member and director for years, though she recently had to drop out due to her brother's illness and passing. Beverly is a Professional Home Builder, and an Earth-Craft builder.

"We try to get as close to perfect as we can when we build a home. Someone once asked me, 'why are you spending all that money doing leaded glass transoms and all that extra trim? The guys don't do that.'" Beverly had an answer. "I believe that if I extend the building time in order to add more detail, then all the extras I add makes up for anything lost in interest paid that may have extended the building time. All my extra detail raises the value of the home. It's cheating someone if you don't give people what they saw and paid for. You have to be honest."

Beverly's extras go far beyond extra trim and construction detail. "We go beyond the home warranty. At the end of the tenth month before the warranty is up, we recaulk and paint the crown molding and trim that might have shrunk from heating and air conditioning, and we do drywall touch-ups caused by settlement. We bring the quality to where it should stay from that point on. We take care of this because homeowners don't need to worry about this kind of thing and they don't know who to call."

Jimmy Henry, Beverly's son, works with her to handle a lot of scheduling as well as to manage the walk-through list call back and homeowner contacts after the close of the sale. "I have homeowners who want to adopt him. He hangs pictures for them, he helps everyone with little things that make a difference, and one homeowner even baked him a cake." Jimmy has three children who Beverly says "he does everything with them. He'll never grow up himself! The workmen like him, he never loses his temper."

Her desire for excellence began in her youth and set the stage for a life determined to achieve high standards despite the obstacles in the way. She remembers as a child being told by others that she "couldn't" or "shouldn't" do this or that "because she was a girl." She took this on as a challenge rather than a hindrance, and decided that not only would she surpass their doubts in her abilities, but she would surpass their expectations. Beverly's feisty determination drove her to excel wherever she placed her focus, with no consideration about gender causing any disadvantages. Being an achiever from a young age shaped her lifestyle—from doing excellent work whether in real estate or home building, to building a reputation for excellence in quality

construction, materials, and design, to setting an example for excellence in relationships from her subcontractors to her homebuyers.

Beverly's career in the housing industry actually began as a field director (superintendent) in Houston. She loved the creativity level of the work and especially seeing that things were done in a timely fashion. Her job was all about scheduling so people didn't work on top of each other. Beverly calls it "common sense stuff. Women are so good at managing and planning." But she saw real estate agents running around in suits making a lot more money than she was while running around in jeans and boots, so she decided to get into the Houston real estate market.

Working as a real estate agent while having in-depth experience in home construction proved to be a strong asset to her sales career. Beverly moved her career to Atlanta in the early 1980s and worked for Coldwell Banker in Sandy Springs. After one year in Atlanta, Beverly was ready to get back into home construction, but this time, as the builder. As a real estate agent, she had concluded that too many Atlanta houses looked alike, and the city really needed something different. Her broker discouraged her from getting into home construction, believing it was a bad move because of interest rates and the market at the time. For Beverly, that was just a challenge to overcome yet another obstacle.

"I called back to Houston, and asked for their bestselling houseplans. I worked with architects to modify them for the Atlanta market. I went to law engineering—told them to tell me everything I needed to know about basements. I went to an Atlanta building course. What is code today and what the counties are building now is what I've been doing for years because I learned to build commercial first." Beverly said that on one of her first Atlanta houses, "the county inspector couldn't believe I had such a fantastic slab. We had commercial style for slab homes from Houston. In Atlanta from law engineering, I learned how to construct basement walls and sub walls. At that time in the '80s, builders weren't required to have engineered footings and walls, so my work was surpassing the code requirements. In Atlanta, you were only required to have engineered walls and retaining footings in houses over 5,000 square feet. Other than that, it was up to the builder, they weren't required to put steel in the slab or to put down polyurethane—which I was already doing. I also surpassed code requirements in my framing."

Beverly knew there would be hurdles to cross when she first got started. “At first I saw that women did not build homes, and thought it might be a problem. But I met contractors and asked them if they would have a problem working for a woman. “If they did, then they didn’t need to work for me. I felt men were used to taking instructions from women—moms, teachers, wives. Men feel greatly appreciated when they’re given good instruction and they can do their job. In 25 years, I’ve only fired four contractors.” Beverly counts her contractors as some of her most valuable assets. “My plumber has been with me 25 years, my painter and brick mason 16 years, my heating & air man 15, my framer 12 years; my cabinet maker, trim carpenter, loader and grading man for 11 years. My concrete finisher’s dad worked for me for 20 years, and now his son works for me. The key thing is I schedule them, give them plenty of notice about how our work is going. If a job falls behind, I let them know weeks in advance so they can schedule other work—and they always get paid on time.”

Many other builders hire Beverly’s contractors because “they know they are going to do a good job. One trim carpenter said once, ‘Do what she says, pretend she’s your mother. Don’t argue with her.’ I send material back like concrete if it’s hot, I won’t pay for it. One contractor I fired thought concrete should run so he didn’t have to pull it. I fired him. You get what you paid for. You have to be able to manage people and get them to do their job to their best ability.”

The biggest challenge Beverly faced starting her company was being a woman in the Atlanta building industry. Her first company was called B.G. Henry Inc., because men didn’t think women were capable of building homes. She felt it necessary to conceal the fact that she was a woman builder, to avoid potential issues with gender discrimination from contractors and even real estate agents, since women builders in Atlanta were rare. B.G. Homes started building in 1980 in Cobb County, the city of Roswell, and a few homes in Fulton County, in the 3500 square foot, \$400,000 price range. Currently, she builds exclusively in Gwinnett Country, specifically in The River Club and Sugarloaf Country Club, although she will build custom homes for homebuyers in other areas upon request.

“Once someone saw my homes, women would say, ‘I knew it was a woman who built this home, a man would never think of this.’” Beverly was one of the first women builders in Atlanta. “The guys really didn’t like it, said a woman’s place was in the home. One builder used to go

around and kick down my 'for sale' signs. He didn't like the competition. I told him, 'I think the problem is the competition. If the bucket's too heavy sit it down.' I said that because he couldn't compete with me."

Beverly later changed her company name to B.G. Henry and Associates, Inc. to include her son as the associate. But then it was pointed out to her that people were looking to women builders. "Women know what's needed in the house and where things need to be. I changed my name to Beverly Henry Distinctive Homes Inc. A lot of agents still call me B.G. today; they were so used to seeing that on the sign. I've kept my identity and reputation that I built up over the years."

She says she doesn't run into gender discrimination any more. "Most men have become okay with the idea that women are building. 99% of the time, the woman is the one that decides on the home. Women see that as a woman, I've thought of the things they need, and in more detail."

To women getting into the building business, or even to men dealing with women getting into the building business, Beverly has a word of advice. "I know several women who work with their husbands, and have a close friend who has a male partner. I would tell the women they need to take more initiative, be more active in the field than sitting in the office doing paper work. The days are over that men will go around kicking down 'for sale' signs, doing chauvinistic things. I'd encourage women to build. One woman's husband thought a woman couldn't build a house, but in the end, he admitted he was wrong and wanted me to build him a house."

Beverly knows her homebuyer. "They like something different, not run of the mill designs. They want their home to be exciting." One of her homebuyers was a couple who had originally planned to move back up north from Atlanta, but when they went to look for a house they were shocked—9' ceilings in \$5 million dollar homes. "They found me. The creativity level here is completely different—people are wowed." Her homeowners are crazy about Beverly's interior details. "In one home, everyone sits in their grand room and stares at the ceilings! It has a big dome in the ceiling, surrounded by a ric-rac shape. In one of my River Club houses, every room has a beautiful tray ceiling. I'll do each bedroom differently so each child has something different than the other. I do a lot of secondary masters, so if grandma lives with them, they have what they need."

“Most of my buyers select one of my homes for their primary residence. I meet many local people who want to move up into their dream home, and some people come in from out of town and fall in love with my houses. These are my customers. Even empty nesters wanting larger homes, their children are out on their own and they have grandchildren who come, and they entertain a lot.” At the time of this interview, Beverly had only one house for sale. “My homes sell very quickly. Half my sales are contracts, the other half are spec homes.”

Beverly considers it “really fun to work with people” and shared a story about what she considered to be the dream customer. “I built a home in Cobb County for a couple that came from New Jersey. They had seen one of my sold houses, and did a contract with me to build them a house with the understanding that they wanted me to select everything. They said they wouldn’t be back until the house was complete. When they came back into town to see it finished, they loved the house—we went to closing. The *perfect* customer.”

“I try to build homes like I would live in them myself; I put in the things I would want. The master closets are enormous with all sorts of built-ins, and large master baths. I do things like redesign kitchens to fit specific functions for women.” Beverly currently lives in one of her homes in Sugarloaf Country Club, but is already designing a new one for herself, which she plans to move into soon. “In my new home for my dog Sugar and me, I designed that kitchen after this kitchen. I take certain things to certain houses and have the architects re-design.”

Many builders have a design center where they refer their customers for their interior selections, but Beverly or her designer works personally with her homebuyers. “Most of my customers say, ‘we like what you do, just do it your way.’ People rely on me to do everything from selecting the brick color, exterior paint color (which has to be approved by the committee), even the cabinet design. I select all the hardwood stains, and the light fixtures. I don’t mind if the homeowner wants to change something; I am highly open to custom changes.”

Customers who want to make one of Beverly Henry’s homes their own, just need to go to the Sugarloaf or River Club sales center where the sales agents will assist them, and show them homes in their price range. The agents will set up a meeting to meet Beverly, or will have the customer call Beverly directly if they are interested in a custom home. Customers can also bring a design plan, and Beverly will price it for them. “I have a very detailed description of the finish of the home, including all the details of the interior and may even include some photographs.”

Beverly's goals for the future include plans to work until she is at least 100 years old—even if it's only one house a year—and spending time with her little princes and princesses, her six grandchildren. "I'll never retire. I may need a chauffer to drive me around, but I'll never retire. I can't see just a life of only playing golf. If you're creative, you always want to create something better than what you've already done."

Beverly Henry will not come to the end of her life and wonder what she could or should have done, or whether she had made a mark in the world. When she's 100 years old we may see her driving down the street looking at the homes she built decades before, still taking pride in the timeless beauty and quality of her creations.