



Opportunity Knocks for Quality Homes, Quality People

The person who said, “An opportunity is never lost; it’s just passed on to someone else,” could have been describing the philosophy of Ben Lively, Jr., his partner Jimmy Blankenship, and their team at Cliftwood Homes. Hearing Lively voice his motives for being a homebuilder is as good as reading a best-selling novel about the growth of our nation. The power of the American dream propels the Cliftwood team as purveyors of opportunity, building affordable homes for the masses yearning to breathe free as “homeowners” instead of “tenants.”

Lively has his finger on the pulse of people supporting Atlanta: firefighters, grocery store cashiers, people who hand you your laundry, restaurant workers at drive-up windows, and teachers of your children, all seeking doors of opportunity to live a better life and own their own home.

A better life is exactly what buyers can acquire in Cliftwood communities. The light of promise blazes brightly across the south side of Atlanta where Lively’s team has been handing front door keys to hundreds of homebuyers for the past decade. In Henry and neighboring counties, Cliftwood exemplifies its motto, “quality homes, quality people,” and offers the real deal for easy living: low-maintenance lifestyles in the \$100,000 - 121,000 price range at Creekwood Station, The Enclave at Gross Lake, Bridgewater Crossing, Waterford Commons, and Fieldstone Manor.

Cliftwood communities are all about opportunity. Family pleasures abound through amenities such as beautiful pools, ample playgrounds, ball fields and pavilions. Their award-winning community of 975 homes, The Enclave at Gross Lake, was the recipient of the 2002 Atlanta Home Builders Association Award for “Best Amenities Package.” Located in southeast Atlanta off I-20 on Salem Road, Gross Lake is a lively development (pun intended) focused around community activities. Homeowners can hold weddings, reunions or other events in the pavilion or by the lake. This “live, work, and play” community offers diversity from town homes to single family homes, interconnected through roads and sidewalks to Cliftwood’s commercial development containing a Kroger, shops, day care, and banks. Residents experience convenience as well as mobility throughout the community without going out onto major roads.

Building a home with Cliftwood is as easy as living in one. Models of each design style enable buyers to see and touch everything about the home. Predetermined colors and materials streamline the selection process, including lighting fixtures, ceiling fans, appliances, doors, windows, siding and gutters. A simplified creative process enables buyers to choose color schemes, floor plans, and a few design upgrades, eliminating the need to make extensive decisions before the building process can start. From that point, Cliftwood is able to build with speed and efficiency while the buyer worries about nothing except moving in their family.

Opening the front doors of Cliftwood homes brings an even greater surprise, revealing cathedral ceilings, state of the art kitchens, and spacious family rooms with fireplaces typically found in larger homes. The Brentwood plan includes a loft for a second functional living space like a playroom or separate living area for a roommate plan. The Madison also offers a sunroom/computer room, separate from the main living area. However, the real surprise is the combination of quality with affordable prices.

Some of Cliftwood's strongest home value points are the efficient materials that set homebuyers free from expensive and time-consuming maintenance like brick exteriors, aluminum gutters, fiber-classic paint-free doors, and vinyl siding, windows, and soffits. Every home features a fireplace, but you won't see smoke billowing from their chimneys. Direct vent gas or electric fireplaces eliminate the most common maintenance issues associated with traditional chimneys. Each house is constructed with silent floor systems and truss roof systems that allow for more true and square construction.

Cliftwood provides upgraded cabinetry, a good line of appliances, and appealing master baths with garden tubs--things you don't find by national builders at this price point, much less accessible to local homeowners. "We're local builders, my phone number is easy to find. I'm not leaving Atlanta if it stops being a hot building market. I'm here for homeowners, and to stand behind what we do," Lively added.

Lively is as available to homeowners as he is to his staff, and is involved with company activities daily. While Blankenship handles land acquisitions and development, Lively handles home building, with a superintendent at each community. Cliftwood's 11-employee staff works together closely as a team-oriented business.

Lively is adamant about keeping his quality products affordable to meet the needs of their market. "Our realtor asked why we don't raise our prices. We keep the price focused on what the client can afford. We could add hardwoods, stainless appliances and granite in the kitchen, but we'd walk away from our purpose, and our marketplace."

Cliftwood clients are not viewed as move-up buyers. “Many people think of affordable housing as ‘first time housing,’ but for most clients, ours may be the only house they’re going to buy. We’re not building a temporary stepping-stone to a bigger and better house. Our homes are the place they’ll raise their family.”

Dedication to Lively’s market and purpose is based on a firm foundation of building experience—though building was not his original goal. Lively attended the University of Georgia to avoid walking in his father’s footsteps as a mechanical engineering contractor. When Lively and his wife realized they couldn’t afford to buy the house they wanted, his dad suggested they build their own home. The Lively’s bought a lot, hired sub-contractors and worked as the project managers. Being a highly visual, artistic individual, Lively fell in love with building. He discovered that the detail-selection process was “emotional with decisions on materials, colors, and textures” and became “tuned in to how a house makes you feel. It was like discovering a calling, to design homes that make people feel comfortable, safe, and cozy, the way a home should be.”

“Home is more than a place to hang your hat,” Lively said as he shared a childhood memory. “My family spent time around the fireplace roasting marshmallows. I’ve always thought of fireplaces as the family center--the warmth, the glow, the lighting, everything.” Positive memories spark Lively’s burning desire to provide opportunities to others to experience a good life at home like his.

Lively’s memory of being given his first shot at building homes over 20 years ago is the same kind of opportunity he likes to pass on to others. “It’s great to be on the receiving end of help, but it’s even better to be in a position of opening a door of opportunity for someone else,” he shared. Lively dreamed of building in luxury communities, but lack of experience challenged him. He overcame that challenge as he was given a chance to build on a few lots in Horseshoe Bend, a flagship golf course development in Roswell owned by Mobile Land Development. Over the next 15 years, he built 75-100 homes, including one for his family, in which he still resides. This break launched the growth of his credibility as an Atlanta builder. Once his reputation grew for satisfying custom homeowners, he progressed into building in Country Club of the South, St. Ives, and custom homes in Buckhead.

Prior experiences building high-end custom homes influenced Lively’s response to Cliftwood’s affordable homes market. “It is more gratifying to work with people who appreciate your efforts to provide quality and affordable homes. These people may not have the opportunity to purchase their homes.”

While Lively's progress and success has been steady, it has not been without challenge. "Getting started without credentials was tough," he said, but he focused on hands-on learning everything he could about technical processes. "I don't only rely on subs to know what needs to be done." Lively became licensed in HVAC and plumbing contracting, became a Certified Professional Home Builder, and passed the building code test. As a CPHB member, he completes 16 hours of continuing education every year. He's also an active member of the Atlanta, the Georgia, and the National Home Builders Associations.

Cliftwood's secret to affordable prices stems from standardizing their products, and streamlining their purchasing methods. Plymart Inc., Cliftwood's main supplier, is a "hugely diversified company that allows us to have a single source for almost all our products: windows, siding, lumber, and roofing." Plymart Specialties provides Cliftwood's shower doors, towel racks, mirrors, and doorknobs. Lively favors Plymart because he can control the delivery process. "Plymart warehouses our products near the site, and delivers as we need them." Lively praised Mark Naffzinger as "the #1 salesman in Plymart. He's incredible, and makes sure we get everything we need when we need it."

Cliftwood likes the quality and color selection from Duron Paint and buys locally. For lighting, Fred Brown, owner and sales rep for The Lighting Company, provides affordable prices, warehouses Cliftwood's lighting packages, and delivers on the day of installation. T & M Heating & Air also warehouses their HVAC units and can deliver on demand.

Increasing to five active developments and 250 to 300 units per year are just some of Cliftwood's goals. Lively believes that "growth as an Atlanta builder is dependent on zoning and land use issues. The answer to poor growth is planning and coordination. As an industry, we need to provide for the people who are coming, not only the people who are already here. The biggest issue challenging growth in Atlanta is coordination between government agencies and developers." In Cliftwood's Fairburn town home project, Lively said the city didn't have a town home ordinance for zoning until it was asked for. "Every Georgia county is required to have a 10-year land use plan in place. The ability of the government to satisfy the needs of the people with roads and schools should be ahead of growth, not behind," he said.

His advice to new builders centers on developing proficiency and reputation by apprenticing with an experienced builder before they go out on their own. "Today's building process is so technical, there are more and more codes, and the efficiency of houses along with environmental issues are more important than ever. That is why being a certified Professional

Home Builder is so important. By 2006, Georgia will require a residential construction license for all builders.”

Lively believes that a key to success is observing current demographics and planning for change. “One change to plan for is senior adult living, which is becoming a huge market. A decade ago, a builder would go broke building town homes. Today, ranch condos and town homes with elevators are hot. Also, baby boomers looking for a house big enough for parents to move in is diversifying the market, along with people who want to downsize, and who want maintenance-free living.” Cliftwood’s plans include more communities like their Fieldstone Manor, a high-density community where homeowners are free from grounds maintenance.

“A woman in Conyers once came to me in tears saying, ‘You’re the only company in Atlanta that builds a quality home I could afford.’ She found us on the internet in her search for a house in her price range. She thanked us for building our homes.”

It’s people like this Conyers woman who represent the majority of Atlantans reaching for a better life, that keeps the Cliftwood leaders focused on their purpose, passing on opportunity, and catering to their target market. “We don’t just want her to have a place to hang her hat; we want her to build her life in one of our homes.” The power of the American dream lives on in Cliftwood communities.

- **Karen Pressley**
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