



A Gourmet Blend of Building Services— Ben Nelson Contracting

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A glimpse into the world of Ben and Bonnie Nelson Contracting explains why Better Homes and Gardens has twice featured the homes of this award-winning company on their covers. The Nelson's drive for excellence in quality home design, construction, and concern for the environment, has not only made them five-time OBIE Award winners. It also explains their blending of home contracting with their other business, "Gourmet Grind."

While "Gourmet Grind" at first arouses the delectable aroma of fresh ground coffee by its name, Ben and Bonnie Nelson's Gourmet Grind is more unique and practical—grinding trees and site debris into useable mulch. As the Nelsons expanded their home building company, they used "grinding" instead of "hauling" to clear their sites, and set up a company to do just that. They condone grinding site debris throughout the construction industry, and encourage contractors to save money by grinding, instead of paying top-dollar costs to haul away dumpsters that get unloaded at landfills.

Ben and Bonnie Nelson work as a husband and wife team—both in some area of the building industry all their working lives, and gourmet builders in their own right. Each of the Nelsons brings a menu of talent to the table, and together has created a feast of homes enjoyed by thousands. Ben's father was a landscape architect who "taught him the basics" but he also gain experience through the school of hard knocks. After high school, Ben toted lumber for a builder and worked his way up the carpentry ladder. "I carried lumber, then became a nail

driver, then worked for a framing crew. It wasn't easy but it was very beneficial because when you can frame a house and really understand the foundation, that's everything." Nelson started a framing company, and later started Ben Nelson Contractor with his wife in 1980. Nelson's approach to his company is totally hands-on. "I don't sit in an office all day. I get to do all the fun stuff, the building, and the grinding; I run a chain saw and hammer in nails. I see more of what's going on when I get down in the dirt. It's Bonnie that does the hard stuff."

Before Bonnie joined forces with Ben in Nelson Contracting, she had her own furniture stripping company, and then got into real estate. She uses all of her prior experiences in their company, from designing to doing contracts and closings. "I spend a great deal of time with our homebuyers to really find out what they need and want, including finding out how they live." Bonnie designs based on their answers to questions like, who does the cooking? Do they entertain? Do extended family members stay with them frequently? "Once I know more about the family, I design a home that fits their lifestyle." Bonnie and her architects work closely together to make the buyer's dream home a reality. "After they move in, I don't want them wishing they had done something else."

Ben takes the final designs, studies the floor plans, and works out the best placement of the house on the lot. Both Ben and Bonnie work with their framers to make adjustments because "There are always things that come up on custom homes that have never been built before," Bonnie said. Ben agreed that about "10-15% of certain design ideas might not work, but I always try to figure out how to do it, as long as the structure is not compromised."

During Atlanta's hosting of the 1996 Olympics, the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Home Expo featured one of the Nelsons' homes at Bradshaw Farms in Woodstock, toured by over 60 thousand visitors. Of the seven overall homes featured at the Expo, Better Homes and Gardens selected the Nelson's home for the magazine's cover feature story, which became one

of their top-selling issues. As a result, Better Homes & Gardens has featured the Nelson's homes in several subsequent issues enjoyed by millions of readers.

While the Nelsons only build about five homes a year, their products receive tremendous exposure. It's not that the Nelsons use exclusive ingredients or even follow secret recipes to produce their award-winning homes. It is the blend of the artisan perspective in Bonnie and the craftsman perspective in Ben that, when combined, make this a gourmet combination. The Nelsons believe that just the right amounts of curb appeal, unique architectural details, and special textural or color touches create the in-demand appeal of their homes.

From the craftsman's perspective, Ben offered, "Instead of approaching construction like all homes are basically the same—a frame, roofing, sheet rock—we plan ways to build a little different than everyone else. We add special touches like pine or cedar beams in a room, or wainscoting in the garage, unexpected things." As the designer, Bonnie's artistic perspective shapes her ideas as she plans rooms according to beauty as well as practicality. Bonnie conceptualizes features that make homes look and work better. "On one design, I connected the outdoor barbeque area with the kitchen. I added a pass-through window in the kitchen, so the homeowner wouldn't have to walk all the way around through the back kitchen door to outside, just to pass the hamburgers."

Homes by Nelson Contracting are found mostly in Cherokee County, in the Hickory Flats area. They developed Billings Farm, a 35-acre subdivision, in 1999, featuring 4,000 square foot homes on two-plus acre lots. Better Homes and Gardens has already featured two of these homes, and the Nelsons hope to have another selected soon. The Sweetwater Campground area in Canton is another site currently under the Nelson's development.

Nelson's passion for the environment is evident in his personal life as well as their business. The Nelson's use their gray water to take care of the garden and lawn at their own

home. The Nelsons' passion for their environmentally-conscious approach to home building is expressed through their second company, Gourmet Grind, which they started in 1999. You know you're looking at the presence of Ben Nelson Contractor when you see this sign on building sites: *This builder takes stumps and trees and turns it in to mulch.* The establishment of Gourmet Grind was their alternative solution to spending thousands of dollars clearing land and hauling all the debris to dumps that just went to waste and served no other purpose. They purchased a monstrous, horizontal grinder that consumes tree stumps, brush, green wood, logs, leaves, lumber, sheetrock, and other demolition debris. Instead of hauling away dumpsters full of trash to dumpsites, they use the debris-mulch on the home sites for erosion control as well as mulch for the homeowner.

Gourmet Grind is available for every builder's use; it's not exclusive only to Nelson Contracting. Nelson said he has been on a soapbox about this issue for over six years. "It's frustrating when other contractors don't understand how much better it is to grind, than dump. It disturbs us to see all their debris being hauled off to garbage sites when it doesn't have to, and instead it can be kept on site and made useful. Everybody should be doing it." Bonnie added, "Builders are used to doing things one way, so getting them to accept a new concept like this is like trying to teach an old dog a new trick."

Gourmet Grind comes to the property, clears the land, and immediately grinds the debris. "Builders then immediately have mulch to work with for erosion and paths. It's beneficial from day one," Ben said. "Every time I grind and see debris turned into a useful product, I get a warm, fuzzy feeling knowing I'm doing some good!" Ben laughed. "It's economical, too. It actually costs less to grind the debris than to pay for the dumpsters and have it carried away."

For Ben, grinding is like stress reliever, so much easier to do than building homes, which Ben feels is one of the most stressful jobs around. "It's a tough business trying to get the right

materials to the site, dealing with subcontractors on a daily basis...with the grinder, there are no punch lists, no missing pieces, or late people. When there's a problem, I solve it with the grinder," Ben laughed. "Grinding at a job site draws a crowd because it's such a novelty," Ben added. He has done grinding near an apartment complex, and has seen people pull up their lawn chairs to sit and watch.

Nelson said the Home Builders Association "has been lobbying to have the burning ban in effect year round. Once that happens, and builders can no longer burn at anytime, they may turn to grinding." Nelson expects to see more contractors grinding in the near future.

Both Ben and Bonnie Nelson work to stay current with what is new in the construction industry, and are active participants in the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association. Bonnie helps other builders by serving on the Education Committee and finding ways to get them the education they need. Ben is a Certified Home Builder, and is a strong proponent of the Home Builders Certification Program. "Real estate people have to have licenses, plumbers have to be certified, electricians have to be certified, but builders don't. In 2006 that will change. All builders will have to pass the certification test," Ben said.

Bonnie recently received her certification in CAPS as a Certified Aging in Place Specialist. Bonnie said she keeps the future in mind when she designs floor plans. "One day, I'd like to develop an entire subdivision where all the homes use the CAPS building process." The CAPS certification assists builders to plan and construct homes in which people can advance into their senior years with "senior-friendly adaptations" that can easily be adjusted. For example, a home can be planned for a family with the idea in mind that aging parents could eventually move in, so two bedrooms would be included on the main floor to accommodate that. Stepless entries become part of the design plan, and door openings are built wider to potentially accommodate a wheelchair if needed in the future. Instead of just sheetrock, plywood is used in

the bathrooms so the homeowner can more easily install grab bars near the bathtub and toilet areas.

While the Nelsons carry a positive outlook on the building industry's future, they face similar challenges as other construction companies. They mostly build in Cherokee County, one of the fastest growing areas of the entire southeast. "With the fast pace of growth, it's getting more difficult to find quality materials like lumber, as well as quality subcontractors. It's a matter of supply and demand and the supply is much less than the demand." Ben said they still plan to continue building in that county, particularly more small developments like Billings Farm with two-acre lots. "I like to build on large lots, that way we can be more creative."

The Nelsons' years together as a gourmet blend of building services has been highly rewarding...and rewarded. Receiving five OBIE awards, one of the highest honors builders can receive from their peers, has been deeply gratifying. And especially after Better Homes and Gardens featured the Nelson's homes in several magazine issues, their local and national reputation has developed into an increasingly firm foundation. Enjoy the feast of services offered by the Nelsons at www.gourmetgrinding.com and www.bncontractor.com. As their slogan expresses, "Literature flourishes best when it is half trade and half an art." The same is true of owning a fine home, built by Nelson Contracting.