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the craftsman.

A NEWSLETTER OF SISLER BUILDERS FALL | WINTER 2010

A BROKEN HOME INTO A DREAM HOME

BY DAVID GOODMAN



The Donovan House - before and after.

Jennifer Donovan was desperate. For two years, she and her husband Shawn had been scouring central Vermont for the right house to buy. Jen, 31, who is originally from New Jersey, is now an elementary school teacher, while Shawn, 32, grew up near Burlington, and is a geologist working in Montpelier. The two met as college students in Vermont, and they wanted to live close to hiking and skiing. After years of renting, they never thought finding an affordable and desirable house would be so hard.

On a whim, Jen cold-called builder Steve Sisler in August 2009. "Do you have any spec houses, property...anything?" she begged him.

In fact, Steve had something, but it was, well, not for everyone. "You want to look at a derelict building and see if it might work for you?" he replied, slightly tongue-in-cheek. He made sure to note that it had great views of Camel's Hump. Unfazed by the unusual proposition, Jen agreed to stop by the next day.

Steve met Jen in front of a dilapidated and forlorn looking old house with ugly green asbestos siding in Waterbury Center. Steve began the conversation boldly, "Picture a beautiful house here." He explained that Sisler Builders would begin by tearing down the house and re-building on the existing foundation. Steve wanted to recycle as much of the building materials as possible and build a green, energy efficient home. The

site had history – it was a one-room schoolhouse a century ago – location, and views. Jen walked around the grungy site, her shoes crunching on broken glass. She was quiet, and told Steve she'd get back to him. Privately – perhaps improbably – she fell in love with the idea of building a home here.

Jen showed Shawn the house that weekend. He was skeptical, but intrigued by the ideas that Steve had proposed, and motivated by his wife's enthusiasm. A few days later, they called Steve to say they were interested – with a catch: could he build their dream three-bedroom, two-bathroom house for \$180,000?

"That will be a challenge," Steve replied, "but we're willing to accept it." It would be the leanest construction budget for a house of this size that Sisler Builders had done in years. But Steve and his colleagues, led by site supervisor and carpenter Matt Rouleau, were eager to demonstrate that with creativity and experience, building state-of-the-art energy efficient homes – their specialty – could be

done on a budget and a tight time frame.

Steve, Matt and their subcontractors came to the Donovans with numerous ideas for how to save money and energy while building something beautiful and practical. By using the existing 20-year old concrete foundation, deemed sound by a structural engineer, the couple could save \$30,000. Steve and Matt proposed using T-111 siding instead of clapboards, for a

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BY PETER MERRILL

STICK SEASON



Jeff Grace's hunting camp.

“Stick Season” - that bleak time after the last fall hues have faded and before the snow flies - isn't featured in any of the guidebooks, and it's not hard to understand why some people suffer from seasonal affective disorder at this time of year. And yet, here at Sisler Builders a different strain of seasonal affective disorder is taking root. In most companies, employees haggle for choice vacation times during the summer and holidays. Here it's the second and third weeks of November that are most highly prized, as otherwise rational people save up a year's worth of vacation in order to spend two weeks tramping around in the woods in all manner of miserable weather.

“The week before deer season is like the week before Christmas when you're a kid” says Jeff Grace, Sisler Builders' new business manager. “Last Saturday was the first day of bow season, and on Friday I must have had twenty messages on my cell phone wishing me luck.” The calls paid off, as Jeff got his deer less than two hours after the official start of the season. While “taking” a deer is always the goal, it's hardly the reason Jeff hunts.

“It's the traditions and memories that make it special. We have a little cabin that's literally nothing more than log poles and sheet plastic. It's about a mile in from the nearest road, and we stop there to warm our feet and thaw our sandwiches. To me, it's the best place on earth.”

“There's a lot more to it than just filling my tag”, says site supervisor Matt Rouleau. It's a chance to get away from work and chores and just relax a bit. Matt's son Robert worked for Sisler Builders for a few summers, and Matt loves to tell the story about taking him hunting for the first time. “We saw three deer on Saturday but never fired a shot. The first one was too small.

The second got away when Robert didn't understand what I meant when I told him to “take it,” and the third was high on a knoll, and I knew there were houses behind it, so I told him not to shoot. We spent all day Sunday in the woods, and just before dusk, he had another clear shot. I looked at my watch and remembered a commitment that evening. We wouldn't have time to drag it out. I told him not to shoot but felt guilty as hell about it. The following weekend, he

finally got his deer; a nice spike horn. I had to work that day, and he was hunting with a friend of mine. I was disappointed not to be there but happy for him. I'd like to think he learned a lot that first weekend with me, and in any event, it's a great story.

“Sometimes all you end up with is a good story,” says site supervisor Kevin Kinney. At 4:45am one late October morning with temperatures in the low 30s and the wind “blowin' like stink”, Kevin and a couple co-workers headed out onto Lake Champlain to hunt ducks. “We should have known that putting three large

men, a chocolate lab and 200lbs. of decoys into a canoe was a bad idea. After paddling mostly sideways for an hour, we finally got to our blind in this marshy cove. We stood there all morning up to our waists in cold water. The decoys kept blowing back to shore but it didn't matter much since there weren't many ducks flying in that wind anyway. A couple guys were set up down the shore from us, and every once in a while a duck would fall out of the sky. We never even heard the shots because of the wind. We got a couple ourselves, but mostly we were happy to just get home without going for a swim.” **sb**

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ASK SISLER BUILDERS

Q: What is air sealing and why is it important?

SB: Most heat loss is due to air penetrating the building envelope. Ever notice cold air coming in through a plug outlet? Air sealing ensures that the building is “tight” by employing proper construction and insulation materials and techniques.

Q: Should attic and basement spaces be ventilated to ensure good building performance?

SB: There are conflicting views on this topic. The old school of thought was to allow a house to “breathe” by ventilating these spaces. However, ventilation allows warm air in one space to mix with cooler air in another promoting condensation which can lead to mold and rot. We advocate sealing these areas to prevent these problems with the caveat that any moisture issues be resolved first in order to avoid making an existing problem worse.

IN THE NEWS

- Home Performance Division launched (see “Community” story).
- Michael D’Muhala became a Building Performance Institute (BPI) - certified professional.
- Jason Kelly joined us as a BPI-certified professional.
- Jeff Grace, P.E. joined us as Business Manager adding depth in engineering and general construction administration.
- We thank Scott Cunningham and wish him well in his new endeavors.
- Steve Sisler donated 200 hours of consulting time to the Mount Mansfield Ski and Snowboard Club expansion project.
- New woodworking shop completed in November 2009.
- SB was recently featured in *Vermont Magazine*, *Luxury Home Quarterly*, *American Builders Quarterly* and *The Journal of Light Construction*.

COMMUNITY


BY STEVE SISLER



I’ve been thinking a lot lately about “community” as this word is both narrowly and broadly defined. While we pride ourselves on being good builders and craftsmen, it seems to me, especially as I get older, that the role we play in the community, and how we define, fulfill and expand this role are also very important.

In my last article I ran on a bit about my early personal building experiences and how they influenced my thinking about energy consumption and conservation. Concerns about energy usage have been front and center in the general media lately, and I was interested to learn that it takes only eight years before the amount of energy needed to OPERATE a house completely surpasses the total energy used to BUILD it. As a builder of homes, I know firsthand how much energy goes into the construction process, so this statistic is rather staggering. It drives home the point that effective insulation and the prevention of air and moisture leakage are critical to the long-term viability, affordability and comfort of a home. Taken in a broader context, any reduction in energy consumed not only helps in terms of our health and our pocketbooks but can also enhance our national security by reducing our dependence on imported energy - heady stuff that I think about often.

I am excited about the fact that Sisler Builders is doing something about this right now. Our recently launched Home Performance Division helps people in our community to understand and reduce their home energy consumption. After an initial investment in specialized equipment and training, our certified technicians began by analyzing each of our employee’s homes free of charge in what I saw as a quadruple win - Our technicians cut their teeth in a non-threatening environment, gaining valuable field experience. Our employees participated in the audits, so they too could learn about the construction details that caused problems - knowledge they can readily apply on the job site. Our employees also benefited by having homes that were more comfortable and less expensive to heat and cool. Lastly, we all benefited by reducing energy consumption and harmful emission gases. To date these and other audits have generated annual cost savings of over 20% while reducing annual heating energy consumption by approximately 496 million BTUs, electricity consumption by 8,299 kilowatt hours and CO2 emissions by 755,600 lbs.

Elsewhere in this issue we’ve tried to give you a bit of a window into the character of our employees. I am quite proud of the fact that we are school board members, coaches, planning commission members and church group volunteers. We lend our labor and our expertise to community-minded organizations, and we sit on the boards that help make them run. We are your neighbors, and I like to think that our non-building contributions enhance our communities as much, or more, as the buildings we create. Our continuing goal is to build high quality energy efficient homes, and to encourage our employees to be good stewards of their communities. We look forward to working with you in the future. 



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savings of around \$12,000. Plumbing subcontractor Don Clark pointed out that an acid-etched concrete floor with radiant heat had the dual bonus of being more efficient and \$2,000 cheaper than a hardwood floor. Electrician Mike Cannon

A passive solar design featuring lots of glass would bring in light and views, and keep the home warm.

proposed installing the electrical service in a way that saved significant costs. Noi Jones and Kevin Kinney got to work fabricating the central staircase using exposed old structural beams, saving money and showcasing the house's history. A passive solar design featuring lots of glass would bring in light and views, and keep the home warm. Steve would design and draw the house plans himself, and Jen and Shawn offered to do their own painting and buy and install all the appliances and cabinets. After making one minor change to the design,

the couple "absolutely let us run with it," recounts Steve.

Five months after the dilapidated original house came down, Jen and Shawn Donovan moved into the beautiful new home that rose in its place. As I enter the house on an early winter afternoon, light streams in through the numerous south-facing windows that extend from floor to ceiling. The distinctive

profile of Camel's Hump feels close enough to reach out and stroke. Warmth rises from the heated concrete floor. Weathered barn board from the old house forms an interesting corner, and my eye is immediately drawn to the staircase in the center of the living room, which features hand-hewn century-old posts, railings made of peeled logs that were formerly rafters in the old schoolhouse, and stair treads cut from the original massive 8x8 beams. Old melds seamlessly with new.

"I love all the light," Jen says as we sit around a table that extends from their open kitchen. Shawn points to the old beams, and says, "The staircase is my favorite." The couple show me upstairs to the bedroom that has internal windows that open over the living room. Jen tells me with a smile, "this would be a great room for kids."

Steve Sisler says the Donovan house has been especially satisfying for him, his subcontractors and his colleagues at Sisler Builders. "I'm proud that we took a derelict building that was a drag on the community and the tax base and turned it into something viable, valuable, and energy efficient for a young couple. They appreciate what it was, and what we made of it, and now have a real pride of place."

Steve reflects, "It's rewarding to take something that was broken and make it beautiful." 