



PELLIS CONSTRUCTION

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Building a Reputation, Block by Block

Jack Pellis, the owner of Pellis Construction, grew up with a hammer in one hand and blueprints in the other. This genetic predisposition to the construction industry began with his grandfather, who went to Carnegie Tech to learn construction, eventually building hospitals, schools and large commercial projects.

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At the age of 26, Pellis's father Tom, a carpenter by trade, started the Greensburg-based custom home building company in 1966. In 1986, Pellis, who worked with his dad's crews while growing up, joined the company following his graduation from Duquesne University after a brief stint in the advertising world.

The 12-employee company has been entrenched in Westmoreland County for close to six decades.

Where He Builds: Westmoreland County

There is something to be said about working where you live. Your customers become neighbors and friends. Jack Pellis not only grew up in Westmoreland County but came back to work and settle in the neighborhood that raised him.

The vast majority of the people who build homes in the county are natives to Western PA and often, to Westmoreland County itself.

Westmoreland County's appeal is obvious. It has the advantage of being close enough to neighboring Pittsburgh but with lower taxes. There is an abundance of green space with hiking and biking trails, resorts, charming towns and neighborhoods, cultural offerings such as performing arts venues and arts museums, and an array of shops and restaurants to please even the pickiest palates. "We don't have an influx of transient buyers. When they move in, they're staying. When we build for our customers, they are there for the duration," he said.

What He Builds: Custom Homes and Patio Homes

Both custom homes and patio homes are under the Pellis Construction umbrella, though the latter can, too, be customized to an extent.

"What I love is the design and creativity that goes into custom home building; that is what I grew up doing. It's what I learned when I worked in the field. I get a lot of satisfaction seeing our concepts

a slate roof and copper gutters. "Additionally, we built a gated stone entrance, bridge and horse barn. Everything was custom, down to the hot water heat radiators," he said.

Though Pellis started out exclusively building custom homes and loves that part of his business, he said that the market for these is somewhat on the down turn. "In our heyday, we were doing 10-12 a year; now we build 3-4," he said.



come to life," he said. He builds everything from craftsman style to modern farmhouse designs, but there is no limit to what he will build for a client seeking out a custom home.

One high end custom home client that stands out was for an executive at StarKist, who built a 10,000 square foot home in Ligonier dubbed Starcrest, which included reclaimed barn stone,

As that is where the market seems to be heading, Pellis, in recent years, has shifted more of his focus to building patio homes, completing about 25 per year.

Empty nesters or people over 55 are his typical buyer for patio homes. In fact, many of these customers are those who have lived in the area and are seeking a patio home within a ten-mile radius of where they raised their families.



These homes have 2-3 bedrooms on the first floor as well as a first-floor laundry room and often, large walk-in showers. As people are usually intending to age in place in these homes, the features are all ADA-compliant. “They are easier living, low or no maintenance, and there are usually amenities in the community such as walking trails, a clubhouse, a putting green, and a pool,” said Pellis.

Today, Pellis has carved out a niche building patio homes, spread out among four planned communities throughout Westmoreland County. Depending on the community, these patio homes range in price from the mid \$360s to \$500,000 and up.

For example, Fairfield, in Hempfield Township in Greensburg, has three lots remaining of 69. The homes consist of 14 paired villas (i.e., duplexes); 40 villas (single homes with five different models). Two lots are still available for custom homes.

Wimmerton Place is in the Laurel Highlands on land purchased from St. Vincent College, consisting of 105 total lots, representing single family and duplexes. The newly developed Phase 3, which consists of 32 homes, is selling rapidly, with only nine home sites remaining available.

Kingsbrooke in Unity is another community in which he builds villa-style patio homes and duplexes; he is in the process of finishing up that community. Currently there is

one single family lot available and six units (three duplex lots) remain.

The Villas at Palmer Place in Unity Township is an upscale, gated community offering 44 quad style villas along with 44 single family homes with eight available lots for custom single-family homes. This development was inspired by and named after famed golfer Arnold Palmer, who hails from Latrobe. In fact, Pellis designed the late golfer’s home, and unsurprisingly, Palmer himself endorsed the synthetic golfing green on the property. These high-end custom homes at Palmer Place start at \$850,000.

Despite some of them being duplexes, they are still



customizable. “With our track record of being a custom builder, we don’t prohibit people from making changes; we welcome it. We bring the custom approach to a cookie cutter process,” he said.

Regarding patio homes, Pellis said, “I love finding the property and creating this project from nothing. We work on the design of the homes, the standard and optional pricing, collateral materials, and once it is all done and put in place, I hand it off to my people. We don’t list with a brokerage firm; my in-house sales team handles the marketing. They know the product, the process, and I trust them to capably handle our customers,” he said.

Pellis thinks that the demand for patio homes will continue for at least a decade, and so he plans to ‘stay in that lane.’

For Whom He Builds

The company is known throughout the county for its quality workmanship, and its standing in the community as honest and reliable. While searching for a custom home builder, Ed Gaskey interviewed multiple builders but soon settled on Pellis Construction for his project. What impressed Gaskey was Pellis’s presence throughout the project. “He was proactive, hands on, and had a great team. There were no problems that Jack didn’t resolve or his team didn’t resolve,

sometimes prior to us even knowing about them,” said Gaskey.

In fact, Pellis’s team was so on top of things that they sensed what Gaskey wanted in a home long before he did. “We shared our vision and he brought out a plan, but we didn’t like it. And then we proceeded to look at a million plans online. Ultimately, what we ended up building was a modification of what he brought to us. Had we listened in the first place, we would have saved months of time,” laughed Gaskey.

Gaskey was also impressed by Pellis’s creative vision. “Everybody builds cookie cutter homes, but he was never a cookie cutter kind of guy,” said Gaskey. In addition

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to the quality of workmanship, he also appreciated that Pellis had the crew and support to keep the project on track and never felt the need to nudge them along.

Cindy and Gary Dzendzel were customers who built a patio home in Greensburg's Fairfield Community. The couple had owned three other houses in different locations throughout Westmoreland County and were seeking a new home, one without as much upkeep.

"We thought it was the best location for us, and the quality building and the layout was a

selling point," said Cindy Dzendzel.

"There were two beds with two baths on the first floor, and the second floor is another master suite. I do artwork, and this was perfect for me to have as my art studio. It has 2,000 square feet, which is a nice size for a patio home," added Gary Dzendzel.

Even though the couple purchased a home that was in the process of being built, they were still able to sit down with Pellis's team and choose the lighting, color schemes, the fireplace mantle materials, flooring, etc.

Dzendzel said he would build again

with Pellis should the opportunity arise, and he would tell anyone else who was seeking a builder to choose Pellis, as they were very easy to work with, made them feel comfortable, and were very accommodating throughout the whole process.

Secrets to Success: People and Process

The construction industry is not easy, but Pellis is fortunate in that his earned reputation precedes him; having the name behind him along with a work ethic centered on customer satisfaction is one of the keys to the company's longevity.

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So much of success in the construction industry is built on these relationships, along with knowing with whom to partner.

For example, Chris Cluss is the president and CEO of O.C. Cluss Lumber, a regional building supplier based in Greensburg. Like Pellis, Cluss's is a family-owned business, with the two companies forming a long-standing relationship 35 years ago. Cluss said that privately held companies have a special place in the market, particularly Pellis, as it is a company that holds their customers in high regard.

"There's something to be said for privately-held family owned businesses. You're dealing with the man who runs the company, you're talking to the guy in charge. There are so many larger companies now whose customers do not

always know exactly who is making decisions. In Jack's case, he is the boss; he is very accessible to his customers," said Cluss.

Besides establishing long-term relationships with partners, another secret to success is to be surrounded by equally committed and knowledgeable employees. One such employee is Renea Morton, a sales consultant who has been with the company for 15 years. Morton has worked for a large company before and said that working for Pellis is a totally different atmosphere. "When you work for a big company, you're an employee, you're just a number and you don't have much involvement other than your particular job," she said.

Things are very different at Pellis, though. "Basically, we all wear

different hats here. We all chip in; it's a team effort from the time someone comes in the door until we build their house and close. In this company, every employee feels as though they have value. We have input, we are allowed to express our opinions, our ideas, so it makes for a very comfortable environment. Instead of feeling like we have a job, you feel like you are part of the family," she said.

Pellis's design-build process is yet another way the company carves out a specialty in the industry. Design-build simply means that all aspects of the project—from blueprint to building and everything in between—will be taken care of by one entity—Pellis Construction. Using CAD (computer-aided design), Pellis's certified home designer creates a plan for each individual customer who can then do a virtual



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walk through of the home. “We develop it in here, and after several iterations, it goes to the foreman and field. When those plans are in the field, that is the final drawing,” he said. That eliminates mistakes and surprises, as all of the team has the details for the project. As a bonus, it lends itself to budget transparency throughout the entire project.

Another asset to the company is Jack’s wife, Carla. Carla is the controller for the organization. Although she is relatively new to the construction industry, she brings a wealth of experience from her accounting (Ernst & Young) and banking industry background.

How He Builds: Building a Reputation, Block by Block

Pellis is a member of the Westmoreland Professional Builders’ Association, which has recognized his work over the years, but winning awards is not what motivates him.

What may be equally important to Pellis besides building homes is building a reputation. The fact that referrals is the lifeblood of his business is a reflection of this reputation, which comes from 57 years’ worth of experience and longevity.

It is quite intentional that the company logo features building blocks, which, for Pellis Construction, represents several distinct but equally important concepts. “The first building block of the construction process is communication; it all starts there. We need to be present and engaged and listen to what the customer wants so we can bring

their vision of their home to life.”

The next building block is design. “You can’t build a dog house without a good print. That is critical to develop comprehensive plans that check all the boxes for the customers’ wish list,” said Pellis.

Stacked on top of design is execution; without the right people to assemble the building, it is nothing more than an idea that does not materialize. “My foreman is excellent. He is organized, professional and very high energy. If you visit one of my jobsites, you will find him on his iPad, but you might just see him in the ditch working with the excavator. He can see the project to completion with minimal callbacks. If you aim for perfection, you will end up with something that is excellent.”

For Pellis, the last building block is perhaps the most important: service. Service does not stop after the house is complete. The relationship between builder and customer will continue.

With roots in the community dating back several generations, it is no wonder that Pellis feels that his customers are part of the family, and the feeling is mutual. “When I do a final walkthrough, I tell them ‘You’re part of the Pellis family of homeowners now, so don’t hesitate to call us.’ That is something we feel very strongly about, the after-the-sales service. We built this house, we need to stand behind what we’ve done, and we need those referrals. That is one of the most important components of our business,” said Pellis. **NH**

Image by Patty Ann McLaughlin.

Jack Pellis, owner of Pellis Construction.

