

- 2010 – Article – Northern Ontario Business, “Bay Builders raises profile of modular homes in North Bay”

Pre-fab is back

By: Ian Ross



Bay Builders is delivering an on-time and on-budget housing product that is gaining in popularity.

It didn't take much of a leap of faith to convince Nicole Neff that selling modular homes was her career calling.

Long before she became president of **Bay Builders** in North Bay, Neff had been fascinated by this type of construction ever since she had a modular cottage built for her in the Muskokas.

“I didn't want something custom-built, so I researched it to death and found a builder in Burk's Falls.” she said. “It's fast, you're on budget, you're on time.”

Opportunity called when she saw a newspaper ad offering a dealership opportunity with Guildcrest Homes in North Bay.

Four years into the business, Neff has quickly risen through the ranks.

Last year was her best ever. She had the highest volume of sales among the 35 dealers in the Guildcrest network, building 16 homes and collecting \$3 million in sales in the North Bay area.

It was enough to earn **Bay Builders** the 2009 Builder of the Year Award from Guildcrest, a major Canadian modular home manufacturer. Neff accepted the prize at Guildcrest's annual conference in Montebello, Que in May.

This year is shaping up to be even better for Neff, having already surpassed last year's totals. She forecasts selling 21 homes.

Located on the Highway 11/17 interchange in North Bay, Neff's coverage area is the Highway 11 corridor from the Tri-Towns south to Powassan and Sunridge, west to Sturgeon Falls and east to Mattawa.

The modular homes are factory-built in sections by Guildcrest in Morwood, Ontario, near Ottawa, and shipped by transport truck to the site where they're set on a foundation with a crane.

The homes are manufactured in 8-12 weeks and arrive on location 80 per cent complete.

Neff has her own crew of authorized tradespeople that do all the heating, plumbing and electrical hook-ups. It's ready to move in within three to five weeks. If need be, **Bay Builders** can even outfit a home with appliances. A typical turnkey home runs in the \$145,000 to \$170,000 range.

Her clients range from first-time home buyers to empty nesters and snowbirds who are downsizing.

Guildcrest also does a plethora of First Nations work across Ontario with modular homes for the elderly and post-and-beam community gathering places.

Factory-made modular home construction has always resonated in this region, said Neff.

“The largest percentage of sales really happen in the North because of our short building season.”

Like giant Lego blocks, the modules can also be assembled into multi-unit apartment complexes.

With new mine developments ramping up in northeastern Ontario, supplying small communities and mining camps with housing for transient workers and families presents a huge opportunity for **Bay Builders**.

“It’s perfect for what we do,” said Neff, who served on the executive board of the North Bay chapter of the Canadian Institute of Mining, Metallurgy and Petroleum.

Neff admits she didn’t have any formal construction training, but she knew how to work with contractors, designers and architects while serving in the family business for 12 years as vice-president of a high-end kitchen manufacturer in Toronto.

North Bay was familiar turf, having spent summers there and part of her high school years. She vowed to return one day as a permanent resident.

After selling the kitchen business and moving to the Gateway City, the Guildcrest opportunity came along at the perfect time.

She liked Guildcrest’s model of community-based selling to get local trades involved in the process.

In the beginning, she leaned on her mentor Louisa Moffit of J. Moffit Construction who set her up with contacts in the trades and began a reference for her to become a Guildcrest dealer.

“She took me under her wing and said, ‘Nicole you don’t need me for help, you have all the experience,’” said Neff. “And I believe in the product.”

The homes have evolved in style and substance over the years with better finishing in cabinetry and in construction with engineered floor joists, instead of two-by-ten lumber. They’re much more energy-efficient with Energy Star values. Though Guildcrest has a catalogue of 40 model homes, each is fully customizable.

Bay Builders’ newest venture is making inroads into real estate development in North Bay.

The firm has plans for a gated retirement community of between 17 and 20 one-story units for snowbirds.

With a fully serviced site already selected, they are finalizing the design and hope to break ground next year.

“I have a waiting list and I haven’t been able to present the concept drawings yet,” said Neff, who promises “it’s going to be a dif