



Kevin Graham and Chris Corriveau, co-owners of Stonewater Homes, at one of their projects - the Roxboro Glen Road home.

The Future for Stonewater Homes

— After Taking the Flood in Stride

By Tiffany Burns

If you spent any time in Calgary this June, you could feel it. It seemed like the entire city was holding its breath. The rains poured and the waterways throughout Calgary flowed high. But on June 20th, when the anniversary of last year's epic flood passed without the banks of the Bow and Elbow Rivers bursting, everyone breathed a sigh of relief — including Kevin Graham of Stonewater Homes.

The year before, as the river waters rose, the custom homebuilder was constructing a residence on Roxboro Glen Road. After two years of work, the owners were just four weeks from moving in when our city was temporarily transformed into a modern-day version of Atlantis.

Everyone who lives in a flood-affected neighborhood knows what happened next. The record water levels on Thursday night continued to rise on Friday, turning Calgary roads into rivers. By Saturday, homeowners in many areas, including Roxboro, still weren't allowed to check on their houses.

Graham didn't sleep for days. By dawn on Sunday morning

he decided to check on the Roxboro Glen Road home, despite the evacuation orders. As he braved chest-high waters, his partner, Chris Corriveau, was right beside him.

"We were down here about 4:30 Sunday morning to start running pumps," says Corriveau. "It looked like you were in a movie. In this house, the basement is 15 feet deep and the water was right up to the brim. It was nothing you've ever seen before."

"The water came to just under the kitchen countertops," Graham laughs ruefully, shaking his head. "We had to gut everything from the main floor into the basement and the garage."

It wasn't the only Stonewater project affected. Another house in East Elbow, also just four weeks from completion, was drowning under the massive floodwaters. Meanwhile, past clients with completed homes (and basements full of boxes filled with mementos) had crises of their own. Stonewater's phones rang with one panicked call after another.

If it had been the year, or even the month before, Kevin Graham would have been leading the company's aid efforts alone, but serendipitously, he'd just reviewed Stonewater's forward momentum. With work steadily increasing, and expansion on the horizon, the timing seemed right to form a strategic alliance. Chris Corriveau, someone who had worked alongside Graham for 10 years, was a natural choice.

"We were just talking about it when the flood hit," says Corriveau. "It changed our lives for a year."

With the city in a state of emergency, there was no time to wrangle over a contract. It was literally sink or swim.

Stonewater normally has six to eight homes under construction at any one time, in various states of completion, along with a few renovation projects. After the Alberta floods, that number shot up to 30, making it the most challenging period in Stonewater's history.

"It was a tough year," says Graham. "Everybody worked their butts off. Especially last summer, people were working right through weekends, morning 'til night, trying to save



The Roxboro Glen Road home, damaged by the flood in 2013.

the house. It was really emotional for everyone involved."

Today, with all those houses completed, Graham and Corriveau appear relaxed and content, seated at a picnic table in Roxboro Park. Corriveau has just returned from a vacation and Graham will take a few well-deserved days off immediately after the interview. Just a few meters south of a curve in the Elbow River that takes a ninety-degree turn to the north, there's no evidence that our table was dislodged by floodwaters.

From this vantage point, everything seems to be back to normal, including the Stonewater home across the street from us.

Even though it's brand new, the craftsman house looks like it has been part of the neighborhood for years. Traditional materials like wood shingles harken back to Roxboro's official establishment in 1923. Copper gutters glint in the sunlight. Special touches like a curved front door make it unique. The stone skirt on the home's lower exterior wall ties into rockery in the front garden, creating an instant cohesive feel, unlike many new homes that are simply plonked down into a vacant



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lot. A pergola-covered gateway to the path along the side of the house, leading to the backyard, compliments a similar structure at the home next door.

As Graham describes the intricate details and features of the house, Corriveau jumps up to take a business call. The phones are always on, even during the interview. He will do it several more times during our hour together, which inspires Graham to explain that client relations are Stonewater's biggest priority.

"Keeping the customer happy, ensuring they're able to get ahold of someone," Graham goes on to explain that their work is transparent through the entire process. "We don't lock off the house. Some homebuilders will set up meetings for a walk-through, but with us, the client has the key. They can get in and look around at any time during construction, which I think actually helps us."

Graham looks fondly at the house across the street from the park. Construction is a part of his DNA. "I've always loved working with wood and building houses," he says, adding that he's been building homes since the age of 17. "I've done every aspect to it. From running equipment, to



Chris Corriveau



Kevin Graham

cribbing, to framing, to cabinetwork, millwork, plumbing – a little bit of everything."

When he inspects the work, his background helps him quickly spot any mistakes. "Having a little bit of knowledge about everything really helps."

Graham considers all his projects a team effort between the architect, the designer and the builder. He runs weekly meetings to keep everything on track.



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Originally from Camrose, he moved to Calgary in 1992. After managing high-end homes in Mount Royal, he became a founding member of Waterford Homes. Then, with the desire to branch out on his own, he created Stonewater Homes.

Up to 60 people work for Stonewater at any one time, but they are not employees. Everyone is a subtrade, as is the norm in the industry. It gives freedom to workers to pursue other projects if there is ever a lull – but in six years, there hasn't been one yet.

Stonewater doesn't limit its scope to a certain type of home. "We do everything from contemporary to traditional," says Graham. "It really depends on what the architects or the homeowners bring to us and what they want built."

In Stonewater's commercial projects division, Grah-Ter Construction is currently renovating a couple of hotels in Camrose and one in Olds. It's a much more manageable pace than their work during the flood. In High River, they renovated the women's shelter, Saint Benedict's church and a bed and breakfast. In Calgary, two historical office buildings, the Inglewood Church and the chocolaterie Bernard Callebaut kept Stonewater schedules jam-packed.

Graham has also developed an in-house concrete and exterior finishing company called Back To Back Exteriors. It's a savvy example of vertical integration, although if you suggest that to be the case, Graham would probably tell you it's just fancy terminology for getting the job done.

"We do all the concrete sidewalks, decks and patios, plus we do our own exteriors," he says. "It's really hard, especially in the traditional houses with the wood siding and shingles, to get really good guys. We started the company a few years ago to keep that in-house, so we can control the quality of it."

Still, Graham believes there's a limit to how big a builder should be. "Some builders out there do more, but you hear through the grapevine that the quality isn't as good, or clients can't get ahold of people, or it drags out a little



Above photo courtesy of Devonshire Baker Architectural Design.

longer. I think we want to stick with six to eight houses at a time, in all the different stages."

Graham will be the first to tell you just how much influence that grapevine can wield on a business. Back in his home management days, he learned that reputation is everything. Despite Calgary's growing population (we've gained an additional 38,000 people in the last year) sometimes, Graham says, it feels more like a small town.

"All our customers know each other," says Graham. "We don't really advertise a lot. It's all word of mouth. It's a really tight circle where we are – everybody knows everybody. It forces you to keep your nose clean."

Being known for having a good work ethic extends beyond clientele. "Because we were both tradesmen at one point or another, we know what workers go through," explains Graham. "We work together with them. I think that's why we have a really good core of internal guys, plus our trades are very loyal. When it comes down to the crunch, we can make a phone call and get someone to the site."

Moving forward, he says Stonewater will phase out smaller renovations. Since the custom homes they construct can take anywhere from one to two and a half years to build, depending on the style, both Graham and Corriveau want to tighten up the process, making it faster. They also plan to start



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For Corriveau, the future outlook was only part of the reason why he joined forces with Graham. Much of his decision had to do with the way things already were at Stonewater – specifically with Graham himself.

“I just liked the way he did things,” says Corriveau. “Everything was thorough. There was a respect for the workers and it was reciprocated. It was someone I wanted to work for. It was kind of a mentorship.”

Now that he’s been part of the leadership team for a year, he pauses to reflect on Stonewater’s positive reputation in their client community. “I think the flood actually cemented that in, how we dealt with that as a company and the people involved,” says Corriveau. “Everyone came together and sacrificed a lot to make sure we were there for our clients. I think we managed it really well. We want to be here and do this a long time.”

The partners come from similar professional backgrounds, which provides a solid basis for their working relationship. Corriveau, from Ontario originally, started off in the trades. Then he worked for Graham as a carpenter, poured concrete, did framing and exterior finishing.

Now that their relationship has grown into a partnership, how do they divvy up the work?

“Kevin spends a lot of time in the office with administration and my job is more in the field,” explains Corriveau. “I keep contact with the trades and homeowners. But at the end of

the day, we meet to make the big decisions together, instead of one job being completely isolated.”

Whether or not they consciously sets out to do so, a homebuilder makes a mark on the city, and so it is with Stonewater.

“You can’t really go through a high-end neighborhood in inner-city Calgary that Kevin hasn’t built a house on a block there,” says Corriveau. “Not a lot of people can say that.”

Stonewater’s custom homes and renovations punctuate the neighborhoods of Roxboro, Mount Royal, East Elbow, Lakeview, Scarboro and Rideau Park. It’s a sizeable imprint.

“I’ve been building houses since 1992.” Graham says the finished product gives him the most pride. “It’s really cool to be able to drive down a street and say, I built that home, I did something with that one.”

With developers depositing a wide swath of cookie cutter houses in new communities across Calgary, Graham hopes to elevate the future of our city’s residential quality, one home at a time.

“I have a hard time with the poor new home buyer that gets the house that everybody has cut corners on,” says Graham. “I can’t build that stuff. When you drive down the street and they’re flipping the garage back and forth and changing the colors – that’s not for me. There’s no excitement in it.” He nods at the new Stonewater home across the street from our picnic table as an example. “With these houses, every one is different. And they’re special.” •



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