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Michael K. Lenahen

Aurora Custom Homes
'Building with Passion and Purpose'

At nearly 15,000 sq. ft., this magnificent estate represents Aurora Custom Homes at its finest.
Photo provided by Aurora Custom Homes, Inc.



Aurora Custom Homes Inc. 'Building with Passion and Purpose'

by Ledyard Woods

When it comes to delivering elegance one home at a time in Northeast Florida, there are few, if any, who do so in the upper-end home-building market quite like Michael Lenahen.

The founder of Aurora Custom Homes thrives on building magnificent and impeccably crafted residential creations of unsurpassed quality that are designed to reflect the true lifestyles of the families who occupy them.

Since forming his company in 1997, Lenahen attributes his success in the upscale housing market to a multi-faceted philosophy based on absolute genuineness. The approach combines his own pleasant personality, ... with his innate passion for building, ... and with his penchant for pro-

viding truly personal service. As a result, most of Aurora's customers enjoy a close working relationship with their builder, even before construction has begun.

For Michael, becoming involved in the home building business has been a natural evolution fostered by a boyhood curiosity, one that led him to a formal education in architecture.

"Growing up, I lived in a home that was part of a large subdivision in the suburbs of Philadelphia," Lenahen relates. "I

was always surrounded by construction and I enjoyed watching homes being built. I wanted to understand how homes were constructed and how overall communities were planned."

Based on this early interest, he was guided to the field of architecture where, as a student at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., he learned how building concepts were initiated. Michael gained an appreciation for developing a detailed list of specifications that

were unique to a particular client or business. His curiosity led to an undergraduate degree and a Masters degree in architecture.

After completing his college requirements, Lenahen was hired by a national home builder, Ryan Homes, and began working in the Maryland suburbs. In 1983, he was transferred to Florida to open a new division of the company in Jacksonville. However, two years later, Ryan was purchased by a larger company which closed down its newer markets.

"That included the Jacksonville division," Lenahen recalls quite vividly. "Fortunately, I had made enough contacts in this area and I was able to go to work for a builder right in the community where I lived."

In choosing to remain in Jacksonville, Lenahen went from building tract homes to constructing semi-custom homes and then on to custom homes with one of the Stokes companies.

"I soon began to see that custom homes were the right fit for me. In the building of a custom home, you are required to cater specifically to each and every individual client. For me, this adds more enjoyment to what I do on a daily basis," Lenahen says.

For Michael, the biggest challenge to starting Aurora Custom Homes was actually making the decision to go out on his own.

"Just taking that first step was the biggest risk," Lenahen acknowledges. "After that, I relied on my education, field training and problem solving abilities."

When establishing his company over 10 years ago, Lenahen set out to identify three aspects of his business model that would make Aurora Custom Homes unique in the marketplace.

"To begin with, I felt that my background in architecture would give me a distinct advantage over my competition. I would offer design and construction services to each of my customers," Lenahen relates.

Secondly, Lenahen was willing to commit to a low volume approach, building only a few homes each year for the discriminating clients who sought a higher level of service. Lastly, he chose to remain geographically close to the market he wished to serve by not stretching himself too thin.



Elegant describes this stylish traditional living room with multiple arched openings, custom display niches and wide plank Brazillian cherry hardwood flooring. Photo provided by Aurora Custom Homes, Inc.

"I believe that these three attributes define Aurora Custom Homes as being clearly different from our competition."

To illustrate the foundation of a close working relationship between the client and builder, Lenahen suggests that the client interview several builders first, and then choose the one who is able to assist in the plan development stage. He advocates partnering with the builder from the early design concept, all the way through to complete working drawings.

"With my architecture background, this is a natural fit," he elaborates. "It is a passion of mine to get involved with that which is important to each client and to help translate what is in their mind and heart directly and verbally to the architect. In this way, the home ends up being exactly what they wanted. I call this 'designing for your lifestyle.'"

Prior to beginning the actual plan of the home, Lenahen assists the client in developing a room-by-room design criteria reflecting how each room will be utilized, so that the plan will address the actual lifestyles of the people who will be living in the home.

Following a typical 4 to 5 month design phase, the actual construction time will generally run 11 to 12 months in the field.

In the construction of high-end custom homes, Aurora typically features spacious rooms that open out onto terraces or balconies.

"Many of the social rooms really have two views – one looking in and one looking out," Lenahen explains. "The enjoyment of most large rooms can be enhanced by inviting the views of an adjacent lake, river, golf course or natural habitat into the room."

Aurora also offers the latest in products, techniques, and trends. For example, the company is known to embrace integrated concrete forms (ICF's), especially for those concerned with hurricane force winds, energy efficiency and termite protection.

While Aurora homes still include popular amenities such as home theaters and wine cellars, Lenahen notes a shift in priorities with many of his clients.

"Clients today are looking for energy efficiency and low maintenance. Smart looking, long lasting materials are in demand, and clients are seeking solutions to the high cost of annual maintenance of their home."

Lenahen remains content to build three or four homes a year, typically for clients who are moving into the Jacksonville area from out of state, and who already own their own land. The typical Aurora custom home is



This luxurious master bath features a whirlpool tub, large walk-through shower, custom cabinetry, granite countertops and oversized porcelain tile flooring. ©Photo by Judy Davis Photographer



Perfect for entertaining, this sumptuous kitchen includes a large center island, alder wood cabinets with granite countertops and stainless steel Viking appliances over elegant travertine tile flooring. ©Photo by Judy Davis Photographer

5,000 square feet or more with house prices ranging from \$1 million to \$2 million dollars.

While many of its homes are built in the Jacksonville and Ponte Vedra beaches, Aurora Custom Homes can also be found along the St. Johns River and the Intracoastal Waterway, as well as in some of Northeast Florida's most preferred gated communities, such as Marsh Landing, The Plantation of Ponte Vedra, Sawgrass Country Club, and Queen's Harbour.

Lenahen admits that occasionally the company will stray from its preferred geographic area for the right home.

"We constructed a 15,000-square-foot home on the river in Switzerland on State Road 13," Lenahen notes. "We also built an 8,000 square-foot home on the river in the Fruit Cove area."

In addition to operating Aurora Custom Homes, Lenahen also owns Aurora Custom Remodeling, which he launched in 2001. His decision to start a remodeling company was in response to the numerous calls he received from area residents who were frustrated looking for a qualified contractor.

"As it turned out, this was a tremendous decision," Lenahen says. "While affordable building sites are becoming quite scarce,

remodeling of existing homes will always be in demand."

In the future, Aurora may consider buying into a subdivision with estate-size lots that will ensure future sales on available land. Beyond that, Aurora chooses to remain true to its mission.

"By keeping our volume low, I am able to be home for dinner every night," says Lenahen. "I enjoy family time at home on weekends and I enjoy keeping it simple so that I can sleep well at nights without worrying."

It also guarantees time for Michael's other important pursuits - his work with the Ponte Vedra Beach Chamber of Commerce and nonprofit groups such as Boys Scouts of America and Community Connections of Jacksonville, the latter an organization helping families in need to become independent, contributing members of the community.

"Being involved with nonprofits is a way for me to round out my life. It helps me to keep all things in perspective," he says.

Lenahen also values time with his family members - wife, Debbie, a sign language interpreter at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, and his two sons, Brian and Christopher. Brian is a college student at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, where he is pursuing aircraft design engineering. Christopher is a high school student whose passion for weightlifting has led him to being nationally ranked and named to the U.S. Pan American team.

Outside of work, Michael's primary interest is travel and touring. "My true passion is cruising," he confesses. "Altogether,

my family, parents, brothers and sisters have logged well over 150 cruises. Together, we share a love for relaxing in a tropical setting whenever possible."

Lenahen's philosophy of rejuvenating the mind and body with time away from work also carries over to his employees. The company, for example, has no set vacation policy.

"My employees simply tell me when they need a few days off from work, and permission is granted. I want them to honor their family commitments when special occasions arise." Lenahen is quick to acknowledge the unwavering commitment of each member of his staff to the mission of Aurora. "My employees are my daytime family."

Aurora Custom Homes knows that it operates in a small but very specialized niche market. "I bypass the opportunity to showcase elaborately decorated model homes and the recognition and awards that follow," says Lenahen. "Our reward is the completion of each individual home to the total satisfaction of our selected clients. Our reward is handing over the keys to an owner of a uniquely-built dream home." **E**

For more information about Aurora Custom Homes, Inc., visit its corporate web site at www.aurorabuilders.com, or call (904) 246-5400. Aurora Custom Homes can be reached by mail at P.O. Box 329, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL 32004.



AURORA CUSTOM HOMES, INC.