



# Outside the BOX

## College friends create iconic homes at Hartert-Russell

By Hollie Deese

There isn't much homeowners fear more than a lengthy renovation, causing them to put off much needed updates for longer than they'd like. Ian Hartert and Kevin Russell recognized that very early on, and made fast, efficient projects that are still top of the line their focus.

"One client called us the Navy Seals of the construction world because people would say they were going on vacation two weeks in October and they wanted us to get the whole project done before they got home," Hartert says. "And we would literally plan the whole thing, manufacture all the cabinets, get it all ordered, get any mechanical subs lined up, and get in there and work like crazy and get it done."

And that is possible because they control their own schedule and do most everything in house.

"That is our niche," he added. "A client can hire us and we can do everything from A-Z. There is a lot of comfort in that kind of situation. They have one person to call, and that's that."



## THE BEGINNING

Before they got to the point where they were known for their stealth construction skills – think wooden bath tubs and elaborate millwork and acrylics - they were roommates at the University of Wyoming working on the side in construction, Hartert at a bridge company and Russell with his uncle.

After Hartert graduated he deferred law school when his father got sick and he returned to his native upstate New York to help his mom care for him. During that time took a job at a cabinet company with an extremely high-end clientele.

"I just learned the business," he says. "I had a college education and my boss realized he could use me to help estimate, he used me to do Excel spreadsheets, he taught me how to draft cabinets. I learned how to build them, I learned how to install them, and I really learned the industry."

When a blizzard struck in March 1996 and work ground to a halt, Hartert grabbed a duffel bag and headed to Nashville to help his sister remodel her library. And that remodel was the start of **Hartert-Russell**.

## MAKING THE LEAP

Hartert's sister was a doctor at Vanderbilt, and after hosting colleagues at her home they all loved the new library and wanted to know who had done it.

"Suddenly I had another job, then another job," Hartert says. "I got so busy, I told Kevin he had to come down here, it was really booming here."

Russell did and they formed their partnership, Russell bringing his construction experience to the table with Hartert's cabinet skills.

"Right away we were a unique company," Hartert says. "We were general contractors who had a real deep-seated skill set. And we ended up getting some amazing clients."

## TRULY CUSTOM

A decade in the boom times started to fade as the reality of the 2008 market set in. Where the company currently has about 20 jobs on the books, at their lowest point then they were operating one.

"It was tough for everybody, but we held on and came out quite a bit stronger," Hartert says. That's because instead of wasting their downtime, they hired business coach Dick Sullivan, who had been Vice President of Operations for Eckert Drugs. They spent six months writing procedures, and then Sullivan coached them into buying a \$500,000 game-changing piece of equipment, a CNC Router that could cut any material into any shape.

"If I need 10,000 rectangles in 1/1000 of an inch accuracy, it will cut that," he says. "I can take a picture of your head, put a block of wood in there, and it would cut it out. It is really an amazing piece of equipment."

And once they had it, they could do just about anything.

"It was the pivotal point in our company," Hartert says. "It all of the sudden changed how we could do anything, from the construction side to the cabinet side, we had incredible flexibility to do curved cabinets and shaped pieces."

Of course all of that custom work has caught the eye of some well-known names over the years, who appreciate the sheer amount they can get done in such little time.

"We have a nice Rolodex, our everyday clients include famous entertainers as well as some of the top businessmen and businesswomen in this area, they just want high quality work and don't want to have to babysit a company. They also know that we will protect their privacy throughout the process and after the fact. It would be easy to drop names to get attention but that is not how we operate" he says.

And after all these years, working with his college buddy has never gotten old and the two of them never imagined their relationship would be what it is today.

"Kevin and I are very different people and what holds us together is both of us have the same exact moral north," Hartert says. "We always, if there is an option to do one thing or the other, both of us do the right thing. If a client is not happy with us, we fix it. And as a partnership I think that is really what has kept us together."

