

A Builder that Cares



Kensington Homes' Albert Toews, President with Tony Balaz, Manager.

Kensington Cares is not only a tag line – it's the way business is done at Kensington Homes. "It only became a motto later on," notes manager Tony Balaz, "after we realized it described what we were already doing."

The first experience Balaz had with the company was in 1978, when as a teenager, he swept newly built Kensington homes as a summer job. "I couldn't have asked for a better first job," recalls Balaz.

At the time, the company was one of Winnipeg's leading homebuilders. After the Kensington name arrived on the market more than 40 years ago, the builder grew quickly, eventually becoming responsible for constructing 300 to 400 homes annually in the Transcona and St. Vital areas. However, due to the difficult economic years in the home-building industry of the early '90s, annual sales volume had dropped to as low as 30 homes. This could still be considered a success, as Kensington survived these challenges while many homebuilders of the time did not.

In April 1992, Balaz and Albert Toews were asked to come in and manage Kensington Homes. They immediately threw themselves

into the process of strengthening and developing the company. "Two of the things we focused on were staff development and our service to customers," says Toews, who assumed the role of President of Kensington Homes. "We wanted to increase volume, but never at the expense of quality."

Balaz explains: "The focus was and continues to be about delivering a good quality home that people can be proud of owning and that we can be proud of providing."

To that end, the builder knew that developing staff was key. The focus had to be not only on growing the business but also on growing the company. "We couldn't have one outpace the other," says Toews, emphasizing that quality is not only about bricks and mortar. "We sincerely believe our staff should have the opportunity to grow just as we wanted to grow."

Besides promoting staff training and development, Kensington Homes was one of the first builders with a national Certificate of Recognition (C.O.R.) in occupational health and safety. Starting in the early 1990s, volume grew as staff grew, and this gradual controlled growth has continued ever since. "That's stood

us in good stead," says Toews, and has carried forward as the company has grown into one of the industry leaders.

In fact, in 2008, Kensington even limited sales for one month to give a chance for production to catch up to demand. The builder wanted to ensure that nothing would compromise the ability to deliver the best experience and product to each client.

Growth of the company has always been accompanied by an ongoing quest to improve specifications. This includes the continuous development of quality floor plans and designs, as well as ongoing enhancements in terms of energy efficiency and quality control systems. Since 1992, Kensington Homes has not only changed the type of homes they build but has also focused on building an increasing number of Manitoba Hydro certified Power Smart Homes.

"This isn't your grandparent's Kensington home," says Balaz, adding that the company is now building for its third generation of customers, and designs have evolved to meet their needs.

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Furthermore, many specifications that were considered upgrades only a few years ago are now offered as standard by Kensington. In the last year alone, the company has become a Kohler whole homebuilder, exclusively using Kohler's industry-leading plumbing fixtures in its kitchens and bathrooms.

In its quest to improve specifications, Kensington uses national building codes and standards only as a starting point. "We want to be beyond that," says Toews. "Our consumer requires from us that we build a better and better product. We also try to give people more options without additional cost so people can truly personalize their homes." This applies to exterior designs and interior finishes as well.

In 2002, the builder further increased its ability to meet these goals when Kensington Homes became affiliated with the Qualico group of companies. Balaz and Toews acknowledge that becoming involved with a larger, well-known, well-run organization has brought many advantages. One of these is increased access to serviced building lots. Another is the opportunity to be part of the development of a large and sophisticated accounting, production, scheduling and warranty software system. At the same time, the company's staff, suppliers and sub-trades now have more access than ever to education

and professional development. And starting in the summer of 2010, Kensington customers will benefit from the services of a state-of-the-art design centre where they can receive complimentary assistance with the selection of interior and exterior finishes.

All of this translates into better service for customers. From management to trades people, the staff of Kensington Homes is devoted to maintaining open communication with customers during every phase of the process.

"That begins when people walk into one of our showhomes and continues long after we have handed them the keys to their new home," says Balaz. "We are thankful for the opportunity to build their new home for them."

He adds that homes have a one-year warranty for workmanship and materials and five years for anything structural. "That is not to say that we abandon our homebuyer after that," he continues. "We are there to provide advice and support for our clients at any time. We're not here just to do the minimum. It's our philosophy that if you think you can do more, you do more."

That approach has served Kensington Homes well. During the last decade with Qualico, the builder has continued to maintain its own

independent staff and identity – it's own 'flavour' as management explains. "Homebuilding is our passion. We do it because we love it," say Toews and Balaz..

"We fully recognize and respect the fact that the only reason we are here is that there is a customer who wants to purchase our homes," adds Toews. "We never lose sight of that. We want staff members to wake up every morning and ask themselves, 'how can I do better today than what I did yesterday to benefit the customer?' It's that kind of caring that we instilled in the company since our arrival at Kensington almost 20 years ago. And it's still here today."

