

THE WAY TO REBUILD

At the helm of Knickerbocker Group is founder Steve Malcom, who has made building—and rebuilding—an art form



BY VICTORIA SCANLAN STEFANAKOS | PHOTOGRAPHY IRVIN SERRANO





Steve Malcom's day starts early, in meetings with his team of six architects and designers at Knickerbocker Group. He bounds downstairs, past his glowing wooden showroom, and to his office, like a tousled and graying teenager ready for his next adventure. Malcom manages his forty employees—woodworkers, cabinetmakers, designers, carpenters, and property managers—with ease.

But it's taken more than thirty years, and many turns, to build his thriving company.

"I didn't know much about carpentry when I started," says Malcom, who preferred playing hockey while growing up in Concord, Massachusetts. "It's always been the people I've surrounded myself with and learn from that have helped me grow."

Malcom was a long-haired 28-year-old when he got his first big break as a contractor; he was hired to work on a sizable renovation in Southport with architect William Thompson. They hit it off, and Thompson soon led Malcom to a couple who wanted to restore a once-grand but now badly neglected house called Burleigh Hill. The Boothbay estate was designed by renowned New York architect Stanford White.

"That was a two-year project," Malcom says of the house that he and his 35 crew members jacked up on five steel I-beams. "We removed and catalogued all of the woodwork in the house. That's when I realized that what I really needed was a cabinet shop." This was an opportunity—a turning point, he thought—to carve his business into something extraordinary.

Yet success can have its cost, and the amount of work he was taking on took its toll, too.

"It was crazy busy," he says. "I was still putting on a tool belt every day and then doing paperwork at night and trying to manage all of these people." When his first marriage ended

abruptly, Malcom headed west to Alaska. He lived in the bush for four months to wander with his thoughts, sleep under the aurora borealis, and sort out what mattered. "It healed me." On his way back, a woman named Martha who was working as one of his carpenters picked him up in Toronto and helped him rebuild his life.

His close friendships also helped him when he was down. Construction manager Steve Berger, who joined Malcom 28 years ago, ran the company while he was away. "I was sending mixed messages to my crew and our clients: Was I really serious about the business? Frankly, I didn't know myself," he says now. "Then I decided to go ahead and plant myself here. I love it. And I love the relationships I've made."

Kate Horgan and her husband, Bob, are among them. They've built (or rebuilt) two vacation homes with Malcom—most recently, a 90-year-old stone hunting cottage on a small island near Boothbay. Kate still marvels at his seamless coordination of cement trucks on barges—at high tides—and his impeccable attention to detail.

"I wouldn't hesitate to do another project with him—in fact, I wouldn't think of having a party without him," Kate says. "He is great at what he does, and the people who work with him are, too. He just makes things happen. But he's very calm and easy to be with. I definitely consider him a friend."

Malcom had always worked with friends, and made more friends along the way. That's why he set out to build a company that respects its staff and the quality of the work they do. Loyal allies like Berger and shop manager Walter Shea gave him the confidence to add new services, including a full range of design expertise and another company, Knickerbocker Paint. Running his own paint shop meant he'd be satisfied with every surface



his clients touched.

Then came the fire.

In November 2004, wind fanned and blew a spontaneous spark from rags wetted with flammable chemicals in a back field. By the time it reached the gas generators and barrels of chemicals inside the office, there was no stopping it. Explosions leveled the building and closed Route 27 all night long.

Out of the ashes, Malcom rebuilt only what he wanted to concentrate on most. The upstairs floor of Knickerbocker Group now houses his design business. The downstairs showroom features expertly crafted kitchen cabinets, banquets, and newel posts for potential clients to see and feel for themselves. And at the far end of the building sits a modest office with a large desk, where the neat stacks of paperwork remind Knickerbocker's founder of how far he's come.

Malcom married Martha in 1993. Now, with their two teenage sons, Matt and Jake, they have made Boothbay their home. Giving back was his motivation when Malcom dedicated himself to reopening the Opera House at Boothbay Harbor. Mark Knopfler, Jackson Browne, and Noel Paul Stookey have all played at the restored circa-1894 venue. Between his service on the Opera House board and his work on the board of nearby Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences, he spends half of his week repaying the good fortune his community has given him.

"When I came here in 1974, I was the long-haired new kid on the block—and I used to have a lot more hair," he says with a boyish grin. "Maybe there are other forces out there, but great opportunities have come our way. We've been very lucky at every turn."

Malcom springs up again, grabs his daily peanut butter and strawberry-jelly sandwich, and heads off for his next adventure.

Steve Malcom (opening spread) came to Boothbay after college to teach sailing, and he took his first carpentry job to last him through the winter. He never left—and has become one of the busiest and most respected builders in the area.

After a fire burned down Knickerbocker Group's offices in November 2004, Malcom rebuilt the building to include the elements of his business he loved most. His showroom (opposite, left) features the meticulous craftsmanship of his on-site woodworking and cabinet shop. His life and career have taken turns he didn't expect, but Malcom is deeply grateful to his community for helping him to build them both.

Malcom meets with his design team every morning (above) to review plans for ongoing projects—from porches and decks to sprawling vacation homes complete with custom kitchens and handcrafted cabinetry (left).

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