

Eslinger Homes: Evolution in Building Green

Editor's Note: Jim Eslinger discussed Eslinger Homes' evolution to building green with us. For more information, visit www.eslingerhomes.com or call the corporate office at 941-371-3920.

Please give our readers a brief history of Eslinger Homes.

In 1976 my father, Jim, Sr., sold his business, a small chain of convenient stores called Breeze In Markets. My father's entrepreneur spirit guided him in the direction to start a single family home business, and thus Eslinger Homes was born. The home-building business gave my father an opportunity that was twofold: grow the business while at the same time involve and grow his children into the business. The initial structure of Eslinger Homes consisted of my mother, Dorothy, handling the accounting along with the interior design aspects of the business. My father handled the financials and physical labor side. My father has always been a hands-on individual and enjoyed the physical aspects. This is where my brother Jeff and I come in. Jeff and I worked alongside my father in framing, shingle roofing, painting, foundation work, etc. Jeff and I learned, literally from the ground up, what the home building business was all about. My Grandpa Eslinger had a saying, one that the company still lives by today: "There is only one way to do things, and that's the right way." My grandfather instilled that philosophy into my father, and my father into us.

Today, 30 plus years later, Eslinger Homes has grown into a company that builds approximately 40 homes a year throughout Manatee and Sarasota Counties. The structure of the company has evolved into myself as President and CEO handling all aspects of construction, Jeff as Director of Sales and Marketing as well as land research and opportunities, our sister Julie, joining the family business in 1995 utilizing her degree in accounting to relieve Mom of her accounting duties, working her way up to Vice President and Comptroller, and our sister Jenny assuming the role as interior designer, helping our clients in the color selection process. Although my father semi retired from the business in 1997, he still handles all our drafting and design needs. He learned his drafting and design skills from my Grandpa Daniel, who taught engineering and design at the University of Notre Dame for over 35 years.

When and how did Eslinger Homes decide to go green?

We have always been of the mindset of how can we improve the process of build-



Jeff Eslinger, Jim Eslinger, and Julie Eslinger Arden. Photo by Holli Bonito.

ing a home, and we wanted to take the company to another level. In August of 2006, we were preparing to break ground on our new model called the Bimini 3267 in our new subdivision called Old Tampa Estates, which is located off Old Tampa Rd. in Parrish. The Bimini was a new two-story plan we had designed for Old Tampa Estates, and it became our test subject. We started researching different products we could use and building practices we could utilize that would increase the energy efficiency and sustainability of the home. It was through our research that we came across a company by the name of Two Trails, owned by Drew and Debbie Smith. Two Trails is a third-party inspection company that handles the certification process to insure the home qualifies as green built. The certifying organization is the Florida Green Builders Coalition (FGBC), of which we became a member in September 2006. At the time, the FGBC required a minimum of 200 points to be certified, and through our research and the features we put in the Bimini model, the home qualified at 253 points.

The more research we did, the more excited and passionate we became that we were on to something big, something that was such a benefit to our future homeowners, that it became evident that building

every home green certified was the right thing to do, and making it an option to our future homeowners made no sense at all. How could we as a company sit across the table of a future homeowner and say to them, "We can make your home more energy efficient and sustainable, but it's going to cost you x number of dollars more," when in fact we should be providing this to them anyway? We adopted cost-effective methods and products into our building process that insured our ability to provide green-built certified homes to our homeowners. We provide our homeowners with a green-certified starting platform, and if they want to be greener, we can guide them to be as green as they want to be. So we made the commitment to build all of our homes green certified in all the current neighborhoods we build. We are also committed to build green for clients with their own lot. We have plethora of information about our communities and green information on our website.

What have been some of the specific challenges and rewards from becoming a green builder?

I would say the rewards far outweigh the challenges, rewards such as the good feeling we get that Eslinger Homes is doing something now that in the long run will

benefit not only the homeowners we build for today, but the future environment as a whole. We look at it this way: it's not about us and the present generation, it's about what we can do now in our generation that will help and improve the environment for the generations to come. Between myself, my brother, and our two sisters, we have 12 children, whom we see as benefactors to the steps we take today.

The number one challenge we face is educating the general public. Although green has been around for a while and people are starting to learn more about what it is, there is still an enormous amount of people out there that don't know what it means. In our quest to educate, we've developed a short educational PowerPoint seminar that we've been presenting to groups around the Manatee and Sarasota areas. We recently started our own TV show called "Eslinger Homes Presents Building Green" that airs every Wednesday night at 8:30pm on Comcast cable BLAB TV channel 21.

If someone is interested in becoming a sponsor or perhaps a guest, they can call our corporate office at 941-371-3920. The TV show came from outside-the-box thinking and from someone saying, "Why don't we start our own TV show to help educate and spread the word?" The owner of BLAB TV was thinking the same thing we were. We are trying to do our part to drive this train and get others on board. Green is here to stay.

What constitutes a green-built home, and how difficult is it to be approved?

The FGBC has a checklist that is broken down into categories. Each category has a point rating system in which you must attain a certain number of points in order for the home to be deemed certified green. The checklist is not a one-size-fits-all, dictating only one way to be green certified. You do have minimum points you must get in your category; however, there are several methods and products you can choose from to get you to the necessary points. The checklist has a definitions section that defines what each line item category point means. So, for builders who are going through the certification process for the first time, the definitions bring clarity to the category. Having said that, because of our method of construction and our mindset to constantly improve the process, the difficulty to go green was not there for us. As for the difficulty for others, it depends how far behind the green curve they are.

Where are your current housing developments located, and what are some of your building plans for 2008 and 2009?

We are building currently in five communities, three of which have models that are open 10am to 5pm, Monday through Saturday, and noon to 5pm on Sunday. The Bradenton ones include: the Rye Wilderness model, 941-896-5005, off of Rye Road, the Twin Rivers model, 941-776-9909, off Golf Course Road, the Old Tampa Estates model, 941-776-2390, off Old Tampa Road, and Gamble Creek Estates, 941-776-2390, model coming soon, off Golf Course Road. We also build in Hunters Creek, located off Fruitville Road in Sarasota, as well as on privately owned lots.

Our plans for 2008 and 2009 are stay the course, build more green-certified homes, and educate, educate, educate!



Sea Mist model



Sea Mist model interior

were very unusual in regards to the pace at which we traveled, feeling a little like Superman traveling at the speed of light. With that said, it did make it difficult to stop and smell the roses. We basically reacted to what the market was doing, which

our industry as a whole, such as property taxes and insurance.

Eslinger Homes has been building locally more than 30 years. How do you handle the down cycles when the economy slows down? What is the key to your longevity as a family business?

We as a company have always kept a fairly steady pace throughout our years in business. Granted, the years of 2003 to 2005

was crazy at times; even though we maintained control, it was at the same time difficult to make process improvements. The slow down that started in 2006 gave us an opportunity to take a step back and look at where we are and plan for where we want to go as a company. I believe in order to be successful, you must stop every once and a while and look at the business from 30,000 feet to look at the big picture. When an artist paints a portrait, he starts with a vision of what the portrait will look like, and then he starts to paint. With each day, he paints a little more, until one day the portrait is finished and the vision that was once in his mind can now be seen clearly on the canvas. We are still painting our portrait.

Eslinger Homes was an early sponsor of Efest 2007. Why did your company decide to get involved with this community event?

Efest 2007 was in line with our recent commitment to go green. They say timing is everything, and there is a reason and a purpose in all we do. Eslinger Homes made a decision to close a door and climb the stairs to a higher level. It was at that higher level that the Efest door of opportunity opened, and it made perfect sense for us as a company to get involved. We are extremely excited about it and look forward to it. Another way to spread the word.

What major trends are impacting on the building industry in our region and around the country?

Recently, the Homebuilders Association of Sarasota County (HBASC) established a Green Council of which I am on the executive green council committee. Our purpose is to educate our members here locally and to work in conjunction with the principal of our states Florida Homebuilders Association (FHBA). Being a part of an organization like the FHBA and HBASC helps me stay informed to the issues that affect

And finally, who's on your team at Eslinger Homes?

Our team includes Ken Lapiere, Field Operations Manager; Jennifer Daniels, Office Assistant; our sister Jenny, Interior Designer; our sister Julie, VP and Comptroller; my brother Jeff, Director of Sales; our sales professionals Troy Larkin and Nate Ditchfield; Dad (Jim, Sr.), designer and drafting extraordinaire; and Mom (Dorothy). **PC**