

The Industry's Community Builders

Jackson-Brown Associates Developers Extraordinaire, but committed to community service

WENDY TROWER AND STAFF WRITER
— The Ottawa Construction News

When most developers complete a project, they simply move on to the next one. Not so for Jackson-Brown Associates Inc. Philip Brown and Joanne Jackson, a husband-and-wife team who are also business partners, find it hard to say "no" when a previous client asks them for a volunteer commitment as an advisor or director to their non-profit organization.

"When I finish projects, it's hard to let them go. It's like they become my babies," Phil says. As a result, he puts in about four hours a week volunteering for such organizations as the City of Ottawa Health and Social Services Advisory Committee and the Boards of Rideauwood Addictions and Family Services and Centretown Affordable Housing Development Corporation. Phil and Joanne also routinely make donations to agencies with which they worked, particularly when the success of the projects depends heavily on fundraising from the community.

The couple and their Ottawa-based firm have carved out a niche for themselves as planning and development consultants and project managers in the non-profit sector. Among their achievements are innovative projects in non-profit housing, community health services and specialized children's centres that have won awards and garnered high praise from the

community.

Over the past 20 years, they have successfully developed nine community health and resource centres, eight non-profit housing projects and several other institutional projects in the Ottawa-Carleton region.

Volunteer work and advocacy are traditions they credit to their upbringing. Following the Second World War, Phil's father worked for the Save the Children Fund in Greece. Joanne attended city hall meetings with her grandmother as a young child, and at the age of 17 lobbied the City of Toronto to keep the Yorkville library open. Working as volunteers on the founding board of a co-operative housing project actually started them in their present line of work.

Some 15 years ago, Phil and Joanne combined their particular areas of career expertise, Joanne's in property management and Phil's in urban planning and housing, to form Jackson-Brown Associates. Then, after six years of successfully establishing themselves in the non-profit housing and community health sectors, government cutbacks dealt their firm a serious blow. In 1995, they were working on eight different projects and all were cancelled when funding was cut. Bankruptcy loomed and they were in danger of losing their home.

The partners had to devise a strategy for lean times, so they became licensed real estate sales representatives with Coldwell Banker to keep afloat.



L-R, Phil Brown and Joanne Jackson. Photo provided by Jackson-Brown Associates.

When the government loosened its purse strings again with capital funding for community health centres in 1998, they returned to their niche market.

One of the couple's strengths in this sector is their patience, and the time and attention they devote to understanding the client organization's real needs before they go to the real estate market.

"While it is useful to scan the marketplace to give the client an understanding of the development options, it is vital that the client know what they need. Projects should be driven first by client needs, not by specific development opportunities. We work on behalf of our clients to build the most functional project for their needs."

Phil attributes his skill as a negotiator and his almost obsessive attention to detail as keys to the firm's success. Phil and Joanne also believe it is penny-wise and pound-foolish to cut corners by skimping on space or the quality of building materials.

If they were to skip at the planning stage, "five or six

years from now the client would be looking for a new building because of overcrowding or obsolescence," he cautions. "You have to be able to ask the right questions during the design stage to make sure that all the fundamentals are in place for a project that will be functionally suitable."

They are proud of developing attractive buildings with pleasantly furnished spaces rather than stereotypical utilitarian spaces that look like welfare offices.

"An attractive facility shows respect to the agency's clients and tells them they are worth something. We take a lot of pride in the work we do," Phil says. Three of the firms' community health centre projects have received City of Ottawa architectural awards.

Maintaining high ethical standards in their client relationships is also a priority for Phil and Joanne. If they are involved in a project as both real estate agents and project managers, they take great pains to ensure that they are not being compensated twice for the same

work. In one recent leasehold project where the landlord paid a large commission, they were able to undertake all the project management work for the fit-up at no cost to the client.

They know they won't strike it rich working in the relatively impoverished non-profit sector, but the satisfaction that comes from making a valuable contribution to the community more than makes up for it, they say.

The couple are currently broadening their business focus by working with major not-for-profit organizations that are not dependent on government funding, such as labour unions. However, they continue to be involved in non-profit housing, particularly for "hard to house" populations such as people at-risk of homelessness or with special needs.

After 26 years of being married to her business partner, Joanne observes that life is a balancing act. "Being in real estate development is just like having one more ball in the juggling act. You have to be able to define limits in the job and at home. For professional matters, you have to determine who is the best person to deal with each aspect of a project, and then run with it," she says.

"In a business undertaking, if you have one person who is a dreamer with their head in the clouds, the other person has to be rooted with two feet on the ground," Phil says. Fifteen successful years in the real estate development industry prove that both Joanne and Philip are very grounded people.

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