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## NAHB's Remodeler of the Year

Robert Criner, GMR, GMB,  
CAPS, CGP, soaks up  
education and surrounds  
himself with a great team

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Robert Criner, GMR, GMB, CAPS, CGP, is the NAHB's 2012 Remodeler of the Year thanks to his commitment to the industry, his association and continuing education.

# An Educated

By Rob Heselbarth

Continuing Education and a Good Staff Are Two Keys to Robert Criner's Sustained Success

Kelly J. Mihalcoe, Photographer



# Success

**R**obert Criner, GMR, GMB, CAPS, CGP, president of Criner Remodeling in Yorktown, Va., never wanted to run the biggest remodeling firm — only the best. On his way to accomplishing this lofty goal, Criner has been named the National Association of Home Builders' 2012 Remodeler of the Year.

The award, co-sponsored by *Qualified Remodeler* and Pella Corp., was presented to Criner during a ceremony in Baltimore in October, which he proudly accepted in his typical, humble way. In his own words, "I have a body of work over 35 years that is impressive to the [award] judges because I've surrounded myself with talented people. We hire good people and let them do a good job," he says.

"When I first began my business, I thought I was what a contractor should be, so I hired people similar to me. But, I quickly found that the company does better when I hire people who are not like me. This way, you get a nice mix of talents and viewpoints, which is much healthier," he adds.



The goal for Criner's remodeling firm has always been one in which employees could grow and have a good life, he says, and the business could profit by providing better services to clients and better benefits to employees.

## In The Beginning

Interest in remodeling began for Criner with a summer job doing improvements on Peninsula Catholic High School. Criner then went to college during which time he worked with a home improvement company. At 21 he started what was then known as Criner Construction. "I was young and didn't know how hard it was to start. I got into it and, frankly, was not sure how I made it through the first few years. I started out doing home improvements, roofing, siding, small screen porch projects. We cut our teeth on the home improvement side."

For the first few years, Criner simply had a job, not a business, he explains. It was not until year seven that he realized he needed to make more money. "It's important to realize that I did not know how to run a business for the first several years. It was not until my mid-20s I put my nose to the grindstone and started to learn the nuances of an income statement and balance sheet."

The name of the business changed as part of the firm's evolution. "In 1977 when I started the business, I wasn't sure if I wanted to do home building or remodeling. We've never built a new home, and have always done residential remodeling, so now the name says exactly what we do." During the rebranding, Criner went to a local university and hired a bright graduate, Joelle McLaughlin, as marketing manager to handle the process. "She fills a lot of holes here," he says.

Now that rebranding is complete, it's time to move the home office from a building on Criner's property to a building he purchased in town and renovated. "Part of planning for the future is planting a flag some place; running it off the property you live on doesn't help carry the company forward. We've outgrown the office we're in right now; there's not a lot of volume in that building. Long term I'm bullish, which



Remodeler of the Year Robert Criner is involved in the community he serves, including working with high school students interested in the trades as a career.



Kitchen and bathroom projects represent most of Criner Remodeling's business.

is why we just invested in the new office. We're in a position to seize on opportunities and buy a building cheap, plus the rates are wonderful."

Becoming a huge remodeling firm isn't one of Criner's professional goals, but growth remains important and is possible only with a staff talented enough to handle it. "I took several hats I was wearing and hired people to wear them. Two people

that deserve credit are Terry Thomas, our production manager, who has been with me for more than 30 years, and Julie Thibodeau, our office manager, who has been with me for more than 24 years."

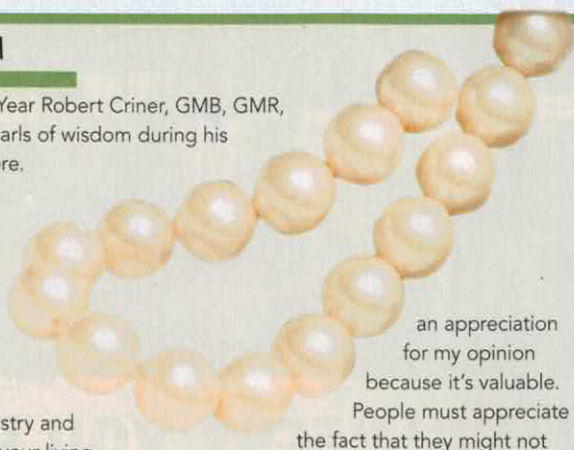
The challenge now is to keep sales up despite dealing with consumers who are nervous living in homes that have devalued, Criner says. "They're asking themselves, 'Is it prudent to invest in my home?' It is difficult



## PEARLS OF WISDOM

NAHB 2012 Remodeler of the Year Robert Criner, GMB, GMR, CAPS, CGP, has collected many pearls of wisdom during his career, some of which he shares here.

- You're only as good as your employees. You must be able to hire well, and allow them the time and space to produce the best work they can. If they produce good work, they'll be happy in their job.
- You must give back to the industry and community in which you make your living, and we walk the walk. I sit on a long list of boards at the NAHB and Remodelers Council, as well as teach the licensure course at the community college. On the community side, I have been active in the Red Cross and Habitat For Humanity. In the past I was chairman of the Peninsula Home Builders Association Pre-Apprenticeship program. Now I work with New Horizons to raise money for high school scholarships for kids coming up in the trades and continuing their education.
- People can be fearful of people smarter than they are. I'm not.
- How you spend your marketing dollars makes a big difference. Don't be all things to all people; know the clients and go after them.
- Always share accolades and awards with deserving employees.
- Little things are important to learn, like how to handle an insurance audit, or managing time. One thing I learned is to write down tasks on paper and throw them away when done. I still do this.
- Don't give estimates away for free. I have



an appreciation  
for my opinion  
because it's valuable.  
People must appreciate

the fact that they might not have an architect's stamp from me, but my field and practical experience shouldn't be given away for free. On the first appointment, I will walk around, solve problems, and give them a ballpark price. But, when I start drawing and photographing and preparing a formal estimate, there will be a fee. It's a prequalifier, because if they're shopping just on price, I'm not their guy.

- Always survey your clients after project completion. In the beginning, clients were a little hesitant to be forthright with me, but since I switched to a third-party surveyor [Guild Quality], they're more inclined to tell them everything. And because it's a third party, it gets done all the time. They capture the statements and put them on the Internet. I also use those statements for other things, such as during a Christmas party for the staff. I lined up all the carpenters and gathered all the comments clients had made on Guild Quality about them and read them aloud to their spouses. When spouses hear that clients think they're gods, to look at the expressions on the spouses' faces is priceless.

Not possessing a college degree doesn't mean Criner's not educated. On the contrary. "I'd still be in the stage of having a job rather than a career if it wasn't for the educational opportunities I've taken advantage of. I believe education is important. It's important to clients whether they know it or not. I offer more because of my education and experience, and my experience is always a topic of discussion."

Typically, a remodeling contractor comes from the field where he's working for a boss who is making all the money, and he thinks, "I can do that," Criner says. "And he can be an excellent craftsman, but if he doesn't know how to run a business, he won't be successful."

A key moment in Criner's career was meeting Walt Stoeppelwerth, who taught estimating for remodelers. Criner spent time learning how to run a business, taking business and drafting courses. "Anyone running a remodeling company must know how to do both."

Another meaningful moment in Criner's career was joining the local Home Builders Association in the mid-1980s. Seven or eight years into his career, he was approached by members whose success intimidated Criner. "They had offices, and signs, and staffs. They would bid against me and they'd win. They were big shots. It took me a few years to join, after they talked me into it. Then, they got me involved, which is more important than joining. Involvement is where you start learning. So I started down the education path where I earned all my designations. The association was a source for me to get remodeler-specific education. Education at a local college is good, but it's nothing compared to what you can learn when taught through an association by other remodelers."

In addition to continuing education and the support of a strong staff, Criner adds, "I would not be enjoying this success without the love and support of my wife of 29 years, Aggie." | **QR**

for consumers to answer this question. What we're trying to do is market more to people who have been in their homes a long time and are planning to stay there. We're not trying to be all things to all people; we're doing the more complicated projects, not the handyman/repairman work. We're going after the market we're best suited to serve."

### Importance of Being Educated

Criner's professional path follows that of many successful remodelers, except that,

unlike him, those who graduated college began a little higher on the ladder than he did. Criner did not graduate college, but he values education. When Criner was taking classes at Christopher Newport College, he had three or four of his classmates working for him, at which point his professor noticed. "The day the professor asked me for a job, after looking at my success and trying to find out how I was doing it, that's when I thought I might not need the formal degree to become successful."