

Wayland couple knows what's cooking



By Susan L. Wagner
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Wayland -

Editor's note: This is the last in a series of articles about residents who have made significant changes in their leisure or professional lives in their retirement or middle age.

When someone swerves radically from a career path of fairly long standing, people are usually intrigued. Thus, when Bob Baker, now 47, left the high-tech world to custom design and build kitchens, he got a lot of breakfast invitations from friends and relatives, neighbors and acquaintances, who were just plain curious.

If they had known Baker during his student days, though, they might not have been so surprised. As an undergraduate at the University of Rhode Island, he worked part-time for his uncle, who owned a large plumbing company. And later, when he was studying computer programming in Boston, he was employed at a lumber company that sent him to kitchen design school.

And now, as the owner of Wayland Kitchens on Route 20 just west of the town center, Baker says that his career in high-tech is extremely helpful to him in handling the sophisticated computer-aided design (CAD) software he uses in his business.

Back in the 1980s, fresh out of school with a degree in forestry, Bob and his wife Karen realized there wasn't much of a future in his chosen field unless they moved to Oregon and had their mail brought in by helicopter. Karen, a finance major, got a job in the Boston area, and the young couple bought their first house, in Framingham. They completely redid the residence, which had originally been built in 1848.

"Right away, Bob became the 'go to guy' in the neighborhood," Karen said. "And when we moved to Wayland in 1997, the same thing happened. People would save little jobs for him to do on Saturday afternoons."

Baker finally left his career as a computer professional five years ago.

"My company was bought out, and I really didn't want to work for the new owners," he explained.

"Besides, I think I've always had a bit of an entrepreneurial streak in me."

Initially, he set up a small office in Maynard and, until he leased the space in Wayland, worked mainly with architects and builders on "monster projects." Now he and Karen, 46, who modestly says she "supports" his business by doing accounting and other "paper intensive" work, are busy getting their new kitchen and bath showroom ready for a grand opening sometime in the autumn.

Ninety percent of the business, Bob says, is kitchens, about 5 percent baths, and the rest is built-in cabinetry like bookshelves and entertainment centers.

As a former computer professional, Bob says that methodologies are in his blood. His methodology for his new business, conveniently numbered, is 1) meet and measure; 2) engineering the project, right down to where the silverware and the cooking utensils will go; 3) working out the look, or, as he says, "putting the makeup on."

He asks his clients to go through magazines and tear out pictures of products and styles they like.

"I ask them not to think about it a lot and not to try to make all the decisions at once. If they show me what's caught their eye, it soon becomes pretty clear what they're gravitating toward. The process is the same for a bathroom, but on a smaller scale."

His CAD software can churn out everything from basic drawings with measurements to virtual photographic renditions of what the final product will look like. Using these, he and the clients can change finishes, fixtures and other details until they get exactly what they want.

"I'm a great believer in letting computers help," Bob said. "And this is a pretty exciting way for that to happen."

In approaching projects, especially kitchens and baths, he finds the biggest mistake people make is to believe that all the photos they see in publications are actually spaces they could live with.

"Many homeowners will focus on aesthetics at the expense of functionality," he said. "And when they look at magazines and catalogues, for example, they may see an appliance in a spot that looks nice, but would be impossible to get open if you had it there. Or they'll see a big range hood right down over a piece of wood, which is just not legal. So one of my jobs is putting my clients back on a path where they won't hurt themselves."

So far, Wayland Kitchens has designed and built kitchens and baths in Vermont and New Hampshire as well as numerous Massachusetts communities, including Acton, Back Bay, Mashpee, Sudbury, Wayland, Wellesley and Weston.

Baker says he feels very gratified to be a Wayland business owner, and he's already feeling more a part of the community – where he and Karen have raised their two high-school age children – than ever before.

"I feel like a real Wayland guy. I'm sponsoring a couple of events, like the Dudley Pond Run. And it feels great to be right down here in Wayland Center. Of course, I'm working a lot of hours, but that's something I've never been afraid of."

Wayland Kitchens is located at 304 Boston Post Road, almost directly across from Whole Foods. You can reach them at 508-358-6300 or "Bob@WaylandKitchens.com". And watch for the grand opening, which is coming up soon.