

Local Focus:

Business gets home projects done right

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A few years ago, Paul Lawrence got into a bit of a wrangle with a contractor working on his home in Buxton.

"We were having a hardwood floor put in in the living room, and he installed it, and it was fine," Lawrence recalls. "Then he was going to have someone else come in to do the sanding and put on the coats of polyurethane.

"Come to find out, he apparently had some issues with the other guy, so he decided to do the sanding, and this and that, himself. He cleaned up, and the room was sealed off, but sawdust has a tendency to float - and a lot of it unfortunately got sealed into the poly."

The situation was a little stickier because Lawrence and the installer - "he's a nice guy, and stuff" - had known each other previously and been on friendly terms.

"He didn't think the floor looked bad," Lawrence says, "but my wife and I did. We eventually got it fixed, but until then it was really a test between two people who knew each other."

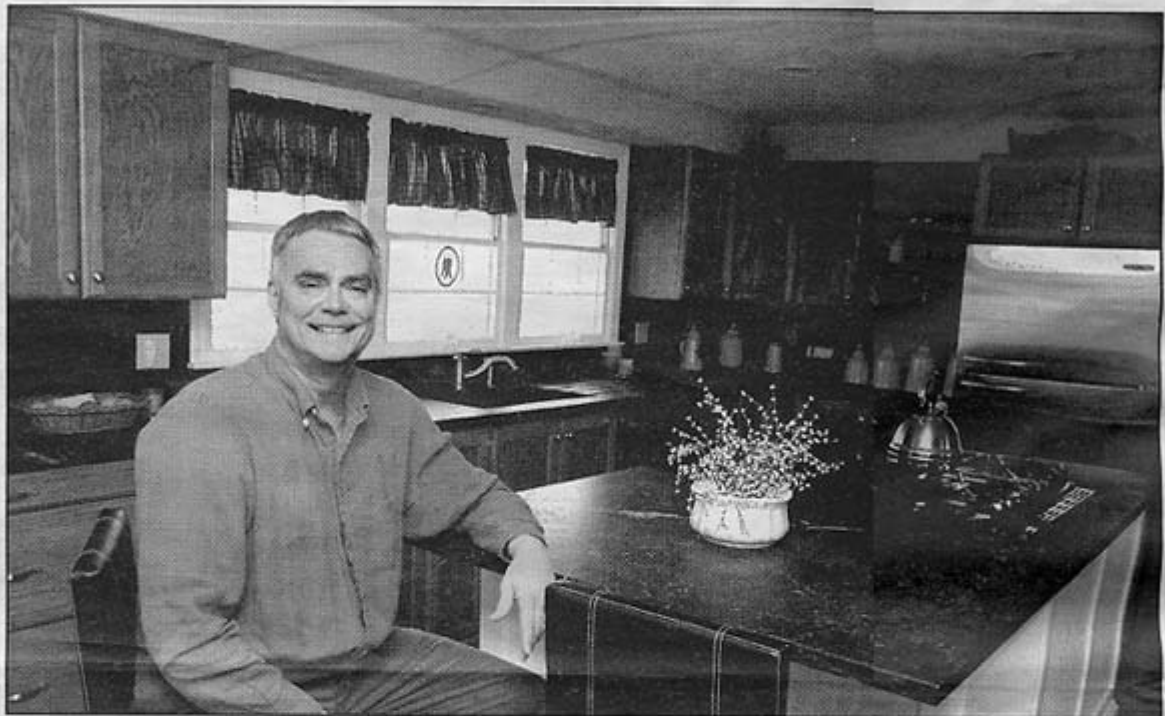
The eye-opening experience was a key factor in Lawrence's founding the business he runs today - Home Project Partners.

The firm exists, Lawrence explains, to connect homeowners with quality contractors in a number of trades, from painting and plumbing to electrical or tree service, construction and fine carpentry.

"Maine is just loaded with quality contractors," Lawrence says. "This is one convenient way to find them. So many people just don't have time to do a thorough search."

For homeowners, this referral service is free. Contractors pay Lawrence a fee, on a sliding scale, when they are hired by a homeowner. The contractors do not work exclusively through the network, and homeowners are under no obligation to hire anyone the network recommends.

Home Project Partners claims that it "takes the guesswork out of finding quality home contractors" by screening contractors so that homeowners



Paul Lawrence started Home Project Partners to connect homeowners with reliable quality contractors in various trades. (Merry Farnum photo)

don't need to do so.

"All network contractors are checked for licenses and insurance," Lawrence says. Five verifiable references and contact with the local Better Business Bureau round out the screening process. Contractors must also agree to a Code of Ethics before entering the network.

"If a network contractor is hired, Home Project Partners is then available (to the homeowner) to answer questions, address concerns and help ensure that the project is completed to the homeowner's satisfaction."

Joanna Streeter of Portland is among clients who have used the network and had "a very good experience." Last year Streeter bought a three-unit building in Portland's East End, and the 100-plus-year-old home needed some work.

Through Home Project Partners, Streeter hired a carpenter and a plumber, and she says she's been "really happy" with their work. The carpenter has since returned to complete a second project at the house, and Streeter has a mason, whom she

also contacted through the network, coming in to do work in June.

"It's been very helpful to have the referral service, and it gave me a little more peace of mind when I was seeking out contractors," says Streeter, a 40-

year-old physical therapist.

"If I had to call or e-mail for more information about painting, or any other project, (Paul) would get back to me soon, so that whole process would take, maybe, 24 hours."

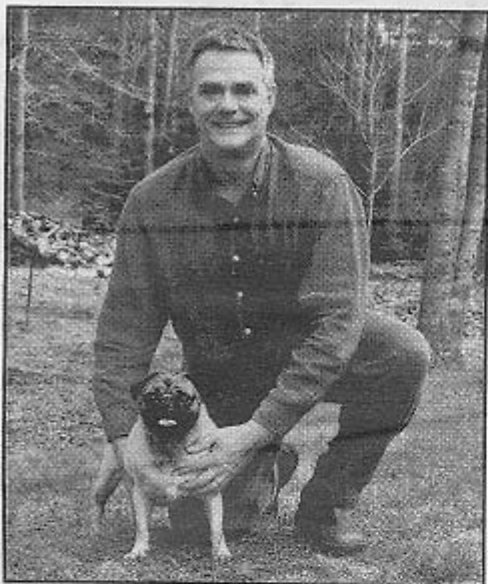
Lawrence says the quick re-

sponse time is a key part of the business. "One of the best compliments is to hear somebody say that 'it's so nice to have somebody call back,' which we nor-

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real estate

REAL ESTATE



Paul Lawrence, at home in Buxton with his dog, Isabel, was inspired to start Home Project Partners three years ago after his own uncomfortable situation with a contractor. Today, his referral network includes about 63 contractors, who are carefully screened. (Merry Farnum photo)

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do within 48 hours. That can be hard for some contractors to do, because they're so busy.

"And also, this is not a situation where we supply a client with a contractor and say, 'here's your guy, see you later.' If any issues come up, we're there to act as a middle person."

Like Lawrence, Streeter knows how issues can arise. Some years ago, in another state, she and her family were having their camp put on a new foundation. One day, the man who had been grading the lot and correcting drainage problems hauled his backhoe off the site, leaving a "huge mess." He'd gone bankrupt; the family had to scramble to find someone to complete the half-finished job.

Knowing the potential for situations to arise, Lawrence is extra careful about screening. Researching one contractor's background, he says, he found that the man was on probation and hadn't disclosed it. In another case, an experienced contractor provided proof of insurance that was suspiciously recent. Lawrence found that the man had long operated without insurance. He had taken out a policy to try to pass the screening, then canceled it. Neither contractor became part of the Home Project Partners network.

Lawrence, a 53-year-old Westbrook native, decided to start the business after 14 years working for the Portland Water District as a water resources specialist and a source protection inspector. Essentially, he says, he "baby-sat the Sebago watershed." The PWD job provided ample experience dealing

with town officials, real estate professionals, code enforcement officers and the Department of Environmental Protection.

Lawrence was also struck by how often homeowners around the lake would ask him to recommend a good plumber or other contractor. Founding Home Project Partners, which he did three years ago, proved a natural transition.

The business started slowly, but that was by design.

"Those last months of 2002, it was just me getting set up and working at it part time," Lawrence says. "We started with 10 contractors - couple of painters, a couple of guys who did hardwood floors - the kinds of things families needed when they were moving into a new home.

"But within about eight months, we had a pretty decent base of 20 to 25 contractors. We have about 63 contractors now, and it's getting pretty crazy - I need to hire a secretary."

These days, Home Project Partners has about 160 clients, concentrated in York and Cumberland counties. The network's contractors are mostly small businesses - "five employees or under. We feel they give good customer service," says Lawrence, who runs the company out of his home in Buxton.

"But I don't want to generalize - one builder who goes through us is a multimillion-dollar company. And the bigger, reputable firms don't need to go through us, as they're already keeping 50 people busy.

"If people find a good contractor on their own, that's great," Lawrence says. "I really just don't want to see people, especially the elderly, get burned."