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Insights

Paul Caruana

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Inspiration, design and a need to be challenged drive craftsman-turned-developer

By Julia Mabry

Paul Caruana sees a lot of buildings he doesn't like, but windows without trim may be his biggest pet peeve. "It just says: cheap," he says, insisting that even starter homes don't have to be tasteless. Not that he builds starter homes. Caruana, owner of Caruana Inc., a development company based in Gearhart, builds mansions — and he does it with enviable passion.

"I have to be inspired," says Caruana. "I can't do mundane at all."

The creative freedom that comes with big budget builds allows him to flirt with his love: design. Every new house is a welcome challenge, an invitation to solve problems, play with sunlight, install energy buffers, and make it all live up to his exacting standards of craftsmanship and beauty. "I don't want to go through life and ever feel like I've arrived. I always want to be challenged."

That, in part, may explain his relentless drive. Caruana grew up in Astoria, passing through the schools as a class clown. "I've always been a little mischievous," he says. He married shortly after graduating from highschool and became a father. With a family to support, he found he could make good money using the skills he acquired while growing up in construction, with a real estate developer as a father and a mother in construction and painting. He started a wood flooring business, and by age 21 four employees worked with him. Today, twenty-five people work on his projects and he's not slowing down.

"In my twenties I worked and worked and worked," he says, but it's difficult to imagine him being any busier than he is today, without stretching the limits of the 24-hour day. In his thirties he started working smarter, found his passion for good design, and became more selective in his projects.

"Every project seems to be a stepping stone somewhere," says Caruana. "We have to be living and working towards something." He is not entirely sure what that 'something' is, but he looks forward to what the future brings.

While Caruana's buildings may look like stand-alone giant livable artwork on the beach, for his own family he prefers a home close to downtown Astoria, on Irving Street. "I like privacy, but I will sacrifice privacy to have community," he says. His four boys, (three with his wife of ten years, Dorrie) bring a lot of male energy into the house, and Caruana isn't a master at relaxing either.

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"Photography and cooking are two things that I wish I were good at," says Caruana, but they'll have to wait until retirement. "I never sit down long enough." He'd also like to find enjoyment in reading ("I hate reading."), but right now he is not going to stop to make time for it.

When he does wind down, he enjoys a glass of good wine and a good plate of fresh seafood. Vacations are spent snowboarding with the family in Bend, just far enough away to still be connected. He also likes to stay in downtown Portland overnight — a city he enjoys for its mix of old and new designs — in a nice hotel, spending time with friends. "That's all I need. I don't need big vacations."

So where does he see himself in twenty years? Teaching his grandchildren how to appreciate life. And he'd like to do some mission work.

"I have a soft spot for kids that grow up in unfortunate circumstances," says Caruana. He looks up to people who use their wealth to do good things, but he admits that good intentions don't mean a lot. "You are what you do," he says.

What he does is build houses with little waste, and look for new uses for old buildings, or old uses for old buildings, as in the restoration of the Commodore Hotel in downtown Astoria. He calls this "borderline philanthropy," and his face lights up when he talks about the challenge of bringing the 18-room hotel back to life.

Caruana looks forward to getting more involved in Astoria in the future. One thing he doesn't see himself as part of is the waterfront condominium developments. "I'm not a condo developer," he says and he has turned down similar work in the past.

"I don't want to build just for money. I want to have fun with it." He wants his crew to have fun, too. He tries to inspire people to do good work and he loves it when his craftsmen just enjoy what they do and they're good at it. "If you give them a canvas, they're happy to paint."

His own canvas is design. He likes the asymmetry of the shingle-style homes he builds, and the fact that people may have to look for a while to wonder if they like it.

"The key is to complicate things enough to where they're interesting," he says. That may be true for his work, but for his life he's found his way. "It's real estate design, construction, and investing. I'm just fortunate that I enjoy the path I'm on."

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