

Successful deck expert relocated to pursue faith

BY SARAH KINGSBURY • The News Examiner • July 14, 2010

Phil Palmer is an anomaly of a businessman – he started his company almost by accident, made a profit immediately, quickly became an expert in his field, and then uprooted everything he'd built to pursue his faith.

Palmer and his wife, Diana, run Gallatin-based Elite Deck Care, which they relocated from Iowa to Tennessee three years ago. Business is a struggle for now, but it wasn't always that way. Not even close.

Palmer got his start in wood care in 1982. He was selling cars at a dealership for 12 hours a day in Washington D.C. when he started working on old wooden boats in his spare time.

After a while he earned a reputation for the quality of his work restoring the decks of the boats, which were often made from teak, a dense tropical hardwood that turns gray in sunlight and from age. Palmer found a way to fight the weathering effects and used an exfoliation process to brighten the wood before finishing it with oils.

Eventually, Palmer's father noticed his son's handiwork and invited him to restore the wood on the deck at his house, which would foreshadow a lucrative career to come.

"I used the same thought process of how the teak had to be cleaned, properly exfoliated, brightened and protected," he said.

Finding a niche

Several years passed, and Palmer, living in Iowa, kept feeling the pull to start his own business. In 1994, he decided that if only he had a power washer, he could probably make enough money to be self-employed. His plan was to knock on doors and offer to clean driveways or siding.

While looking into the price of the machines, he met a man named Mike Polosky, who owned a store called Power Cleaner Corp. in Des Moines, Iowa

"I met this guy and he liked to talk just like us," Palmer said, referring to himself and his wife. "And he made a deal with me on a power washer."

And then Polosky did something that would change Palmer's life – he gave him a manual written by Wolman, a company that created a certain kind of wood deck in the 1920s. The explanations of how to care for wood clicked with Palmer, and they were mostly in line with the way he had cared for the boat decks he worked on a decade prior.

"It wasn't just getting out there with a power washer and water-blasting the wood to death; it's not going out there and buying some bleachy product," he said. "In their explanation, it talked about cleaning and brightening it."

So Palmer hit the pavement and began to try to get deck work around town. In the process, he met a woman who worked for the *Des Moines Register*. After hearing about Palmer's unique process, she talked to one of the writers about featuring him in the home improvement section of the paper.

"Next thing you know, one day at 6 o'clock in the morning the phone was ringing," he said. By 1 p.m., Palmer said, they'd received 136 calls from potential customers.

The article had hit a nerve in Des Moines, where many homeowners had cedar or redwood decks that



Phil Palmer, owner of Elite Deck Care, at his home in Gallatin, where he relocated from Iowa with his wife Diana to study under a Hendersonville preacher.

they would treat with little success, and after getting frustrated, would eventually paint over.

There was only two months left before winter, but in that time Palmer said his newfound business brought in \$40,000. The following season, he made nearly double that.

"We'd opened a niche – a niche that was really unique in that area," he said. "And we weren't overcharging; I was just following the manual."

Scaling back and starting over

Palmer's business continued to snowball, and he received offers nationwide to restore the decks of wealthy homeowners like professional golfers and famous musicians. By this time, Wolman had hired him as a consultant for other deck professionals, and he spent the off-seasons flying around the country to conduct training seminars.

It was 1999, and Palmer had 27 employees. He was receiving inquiries from Japan, Australia and the United Arab Emirates, and he was starting to feel like he was losing the hands-on control of his business in the process of keeping up with its growth.

"The business was somewhat running us at that point," said his wife, Diana Palmer. "We wanted to so desperately meet the need."

As the Palmers started to scale back, another major change was on their horizon.

While on business in Memphis, Palmer made a trip to Nashville where he met up with a client who wanted him to meet a local pastor. During his visit, Palmer found the "bonanza" of decks around Old Hickory Lake astounding.

As it turned out, he was also astounded by the preacher, a Hendersonville man named Jim Brown who runs Grace and Truth Ministries. Brown made such an impression on Palmer, that in 2007 he and his wife decided to leave behind a 400-client customer base in Iowa to relocate to Gallatin.

"It was the Bible that brought us here," Palmer said. "We drove 750 miles to restart here."

Business so far is "growing exponentially," but "right now it's been a struggle financially," he said.

One of the challenges has been in re-educating customers who received bad advice about how to care for their decks.

"Everybody wants to just paint wood," Diane Palmer said. "Painting is the wrong thing for deck wood because of moisture. You're sugar coating it. You're making it look good, but you're hurting the wood."

Phil Palmer has had six surgeries on his hands throughout his 4,000-deck career. Nonetheless, his love for wood remains.

"I still look forward to the next project," he said.

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JUST THE FACTS

Name: Elite Deck Care

Contact: 753-1935

Website: TheDeckGuy.com

How long in business: 16 years

Business type: Deck restoration and protection

Startup capital: \$0

Inspiration: "I love what I'm doing."

Role model: Mike Polosky, owner of Power Cleaner Corp., in Des Moines, Iowa

Best lesson learned: "Don't cut any corners."

Motto: "We don't build 'em – we clean and finish 'em."

Rookie advice: "Be honest, not only to your customers, but to yourself."