

Gimme Shelter emphasizes ‘High Performance Housing’

By Steve Ellingboe

For nearly two decades, Amherst’s “Gimme Shelter” design and construction company has been building the most energy-efficient homes in Wisconsin.

The firm, which has earned a reputation for building quality custom homes that are durable, beautiful, comfortable and environmentally friendly, was started in 1987 by original partners Ray Reser, Mark Klein and James McKnight, who all shared a similar philosophy about home construction methods and protecting the environment. Today, 18 years later, Klein and McKnight still run the business, while Reser has relocated with his family to Australia, where he is involved in anthropological research.

“His story is a lot more interesting than ours,” said McKnight of his former partner. “Ray is researching and cataloging indigenous stone paintings in northern Australia. It’s a fascinating thing.”

McKnight recalled how the three men started Gimme Shelter back in the 1980s. His background was not in construction. In fact, McKnight said he had earned a journalism degree in college, “but never actually worked in the field.” He said he had been working in various “odds and ends” when he decided to build his home in 1980.

In researching various construction methods, McKnight learned about strap-wall construction, passive solar and other techniques that he eventually incorporated into his own home design.

“Once I built our home,” he recalled, “other people began asking me to work on their places.”

McKnight said he and Mark Klein “probably met at a party.” Klein, a native of the Fox Valley, credits his interest in construction to his father, who was a chemical engineer for the Kimberly Clark Corporation, but “also had an interest in architecture and building,” according to Klein. “My dad built our family’s house when I was growing up,” he recalled, “so I was always kind of living in a construction zone. I started helping him out at a pretty young age, so he sort of introduced me to the building business and taught me a lot.”

Klein said by the time he moved to the Amherst area in the mid-1970s, he had a background in art and sculpture and

became “fascinated by the whole back-to-the-land movement and farming and energy issues.” He, too, began building his own home.

“After that,” he said, “I, too, started doing some projects for other people, and then I hooked up with Ray and with Jim, and we started tackling some more elaborate construction projects.”

The company name, “Gimme Shelter,” was inspired by a popular Rolling Stones song.

“I think we came up with it during one of our lunch breaks,” McKnight said. “I think we saw ourselves as something like a rock and roll band.”

“Part of it,” Klein recalled, “was the idea of a group of people working together – and having fun at it – to achieve something that you couldn’t do by yourself.”

Klein said joining the group was “a big revelation for him,” because when he first started working construction, he worked almost entirely by himself, even on “some fairly large projects.”

“At the time, I thought that was really the way to do things,” he explained. “You don’t have to worry about dealing with other people. You just go ahead. But the great revelation came later,” he continued, “when I discovered how incredible it is to be a part of a collective process, working with a group of people to accom-

plish something. There’s an energy and a dynamic that you just can’t achieve on your own.”

Today, Gimme Shelter employs a total of eleven workers, including the two partners.

“Most of those people have been with us for ten or fifteen years,” Klein said, “so there is a great sense of consistency and a depth of relationships.”

“All of our workers are great resources for us,” McKnight added. “This company is way bigger than just the two of us. On the job, everyone is sort of equal when it comes to presenting ideas. Our goal is also to try to have a fairly good time while we’re working.”

Because of their reputation for the type of construction they do, Klein said, the firm never has to go out hiring.

“We have workers coming to us,” Klein said, “because they want to be involved in what we’re doing.”

What they’re doing is building the most durable and energy-efficient homes in state, according to the non-profit Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation, which sets ratings for residential construction. One of their homes recently received an EPA rating of 97, the highest-rated home ever built in the state of Wisconsin.

In every home they build, Gimme Shelter emphasizes using materials that are durable,



The Gimme Shelter Crew. Top, Fred Wienandt, Scot Geske, Mark Klein, Mike Torzewski, Jeff Steinmetz, Dave Shantz, Mark Dostal, John Brown and Jim McKnight. Pictured left of the banister are LJ Booth and Laura Lee.

lot more of the traditional materials. We are always interested in using materials that have been produced in a clean and sustainable way, and that can be recycled.”

“We have a history of building really high-performance homes in terms of energy efficiency,” Klein said. “That is how we actually got into the business following the first energy crisis back in the 1970s. We did a lot of experimentation back in those years, and we learned about what works and what doesn’t, so that by the time we started Gimme Shelter, we had gone through the learning curve and we knew what we were doing.”

Their construction techniques include: super-insulation throughout, strapped-wall construction, seven-inch exterior walls, a minimum of 15 inches of insulation in the ceilings, sealed vapor barriers, airtight electrical boxes, argon-filled, triple-pane windows, radon mitigation systems, and exterior surfaces that include stone, brick, cement or natural wood. They recommend galvanized steel roofing, rather than traditional asphalt shingles, and they also incorporate and recommend energy-efficient systems within the home such as passive solar, heat exchangers, breathable wall systems, in-floor radiant heating, direct-vent high-efficiency water heaters, masonry heaters, renewable electrical systems and central vacuums. The final results are super-energy-efficient homes with an R-30 insulation rating in the walls and R-60 in the ceilings.

“Most of our customers come to us because they have a conscience,” Klein said. “They want a high-quality home that is not only beautiful and comfortable, but is also durable, energy-efficient and environmentally friendly. Most of our clients say they plan to live forever in the house that we build for them.”

“Out of all the houses we’ve built,” McKnight added, “nobody has ever moved out of one yet.”

“When we build a home,” Klein said, “we emphasize the long-term payback, not the short-term type of construction that is going to end up costing the home owner more over the life of a house.”

As an example, Klein said, “You might drive through a typical subdivision today, and you see homes fifteen or twenty years old that are being completely remodeled – re-sided, re-roofed, re-carpeted, all new windows, etc. That’s not really a good investment of either money or materials. It would be better to spend more up front and not throw so much away later.”

He used their recommendation of a galvanized steel roof as an example.

“A steel roof might add three to five thousand dollars to the initial cost of a house, over the traditional asphalt shingles. But fifteen or twenty years from now, you won’t have the expense of having to re-roof that house, and you won’t be filling some landfill with more asphalt shingles.” Klein said he is happy to see that after many years, steel roofs are “making a great revival” in residential building.

McKnight and Klein are both active, of course, in community service and energy education. They present lectures, workshops and have authored many articles on their construction methods and philosophies. They support and are involved in the Midwest Renewable Energy Fair, and they say local residents are fortunate to have the nearby organization as a valuable resource.

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A recent home constructed near Marshfield is a passive solar design with in-floor radiant heat. Below, the “Sun Chaser” trailer set up at a job site provides the necessary electricity for home framing prior to having access to conventional electric hookups.

