

THE CONNECTION

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TOP RATINGS: BOWA Builders Inc. founders Josh Baker(left) and Larry Weinberg display their framed Inc. magazine cover in which their company was listed number 308 of the 500 fastest growing independent companies in America.

By NOEL S. BRADY

The Connection

Great Falls resident and remodeling contractor Josh Baker has been recognized by Inc. magazine as the owner of one of the country's 500 fastest-growing privately owned businesses.

The 31-year-old Baker, who was born and raised in Great Falls, has seen his BOWA Builders Inc. soar to a million-dollar-plus operation in just six years.

Baker credits the firm's success to high-quality design delivered at competitive prices.

While the business is located in Arlington, Baker and his partner (and college fraternity brother) Larry Weinberg, also 31, do 50 percent of their business in Great Falls.

"Because of the demanding clients in Great Falls, that expect the best in architectural work — we're perfect there," Baker said. Plus, in a tightly knit community like Great Falls, word gets around, and that's benefitted BOWA and its partners.

Baker and Weinberg, who lives in Arlington, started their renovations company in 1988, just a few years

after they graduated from the University of Virginia.

By the end of their first year the two young entrepreneurs had hired four people to help them work on 10 to 15 contracts, which brought in \$168,000 in revenue. Five years later, in 1993, the firm had grown a whopping 870 percent as revenue hit \$1.7 million.

Growing up in Great Falls, Baker said, he developed a sense of community pride at an early age, which is one of the reasons why he's content to stay put.

He is the son of Great Falls physician Dr. Stephen R. Baker and Norma K. Baker, who is a director at the library of Congress in Washington. The family has lived in Great Falls since 1972, so he feels quite at home.

"I still enjoy the fact that if I go to the store I always run into at least three people that I know," he said.

After graduating from Langley High School in 1981, Baker went on to UVA, where he earned a degree in chemistry.

Toward the end of their four years

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at UVA, Baker and Weinberg made a pact to someday start a business together. Although they weren't sure what they would do, the possibility of opening a remodeling firm was there, Weinberg said, because the market was good and he had some experience in construction before going to college.

So the two Phi Delta Theta brothers sealed the deal and put off making more substantial plans until they obtained some real-life work experience.

"While we were in school we committed to work together on some entrepreneurial venture," Baker said, "but we decided we'd better get some work experience before we went off on our own."

After graduating in 1985, Baker took a job with Exxon Chemical as a chemist in Baton Rouge, La., and then in Houston. Weinberg went to work in accounting with Arthur Andersen Co. in Atlanta.

After three years, they were ready to start BOWA Builders.

Since being recognized last month as number 308 in Inc. magazine's 13th annual list of the 500 fastest-growing private companies in America, Baker and Weinberg have been busy taking their company a step further in actually building homes.

That was part of their original goal, but in the beginning years, when new home sales were soft because of the recession, they decided to concentrate on remodeling until the market stabilized.

Now that the market is showing improvement, Baker said his company is making a smooth transition

to building in addition to remodeling and renovating. Baker said his company plans to build four to six homes by next year, at least two of which will be on Great Falls' Falcon Ridge and Leigh Mill Road.

"We built a few houses in 1990, but the housing market took a nose dive, then we stopped completely," Baker said. "We always planned on having a large remodeling firm. Since we planned for it we put systems in place to lessen the growing pains."

In estimating the cost of projects, they sought to quote the lowest prices for the highest-quality work. They also sharpened their purchasing tactics to find the most economical raw products for the high-quality designs on which they pride themselves.

"Even from the beginning we knew exactly how much we were making or losing on each job," Weinberg said.

With all these key components in place, Baker said, their success would still have been impossible without their dedication to productive marketing and "a relentless commitment to keeping the client happy."

Among Bakers clients in Great Falls are his own parents, who commissioned his company to completely renovate their home last year.

Baker doesn't see BOWA's shift to building new homes as very radical. "In a sense it's kind of an outgrowth of what we've been doing," he said.

For one thing, he explained, new homes require less administrative support because fewer contracts are involved. That means BOWA has more time to concentrate on individual projects — and, of course, keep its emphasis on high quality.