



Taking Removable Forms to a Higher Level

by Jeff McClellan

Many people go to Florida to escape the cold, but Vince Heuser wasn't looking to retire. The former Kentucky basement contractor just wanted to put an end to his forced winter vacations and begin working year-round.

In the Sunshine State, however, high water tables are the rule, and there isn't a lot of basement work. Heuser is still using removable forms and pouring concrete, but what he's pouring now are above-grade homes.

Heuser, who runs a crew of 50 pouring four houses a day for Solid Wall Systems, a subsidiary of Mercedes Homes, has joined the ranks of basement contractors who are raising their sights, peering out of basements, and pulling removable forms to a higher level.

"The interest level is increasing every year," says Ed Sauter, executive director of the Concrete Foundations Association and the Concrete Homes Council, "and the number of people taking the plunge is increasing—but at a slow pace."

Ball Brothers Foundations in Ohio has gotten its feet wet in concrete

homes and is considering a deeper plunge. "We think above-grade concrete homes are the wave of the future, and we want to be on the front of the wave," says Dan Carpenter, a partner manager with the company. Carpenter emphasizes that the transition is a natural one for any basement contractor: "We know how to pour concrete."

Moving above ground creates more business for a trained crew, says David R. Pfanmiller, with Security Building Group in Raleigh, N.C., and doing an entire house is more lucrative than "just plunkin' in a basement." Plus, he says the risks are minimal.

"The equipment is the same, so you're not investing in anything new," says Pfanmiller, who, with his partner, Curt Fields, began pouring above-grade homes a few years ago. If it doesn't work, he says, you can always take your forms back below ground.

Of course, there is a learning curve. A full house takes more forms and more coordination with subcontractors than a basement. Heuser pours 6-inch walls, which require more steel, and there are



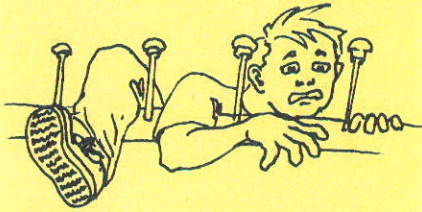
A basement contractor turned above-grade home builder, Vince Heuser has found the ideal situation for pouring concrete homes. His company is a subsidiary of Mercedes Homes, a large builder in Florida, which keeps Heuser's crew busy pouring four homes a day.

more door and window openings above ground as well. Also, says Heuser, "Your tolerances are so much tighter with walls being, number one, perfectly smooth and, number two, perfectly plumb. You can see everything. Whereas in the basement, it's going to be covered with waterproofing and dirt in a couple of days."

The biggest challenge faced by builders of cast-in-place homes is marketing. "The people who market your product have to be in the right frame of mind because it is a little different, and right now it costs a little bit more," says Pfanmiller, chairman of the Concrete Homes Council.

Florida, however, offers a ripe market, says Sauter, because the government is

Tips for the Switch



Thinking of climbing out of the basement to try some above grade work? Here are a few tips from industry experts and contractors.

Use your resources.

Your forms supplier and groups like the Concrete Foundations Association, Concrete Homes Council, and Portland Cement Association can provide advice and networking.

Adopt a positive attitude.

Enthusiasm about concrete homes and confidence in your skills will help you acquire partners, sell houses, and hurdle challenges. "If poured walls are what you do, you can do this," says Dan Carpenter of Ball Brothers Foundations.

Find innovative thinkers.

You'll need builders and subcontractors who are receptive to new ideas. "Find that one unique builder in the stable of builders you use—the innovative thinker," says David Pfanmiller of Security Building Group. "That's the guy you need to hook up with."

Make friends with builders.

Pouring a concrete home requires more coordination with the builder than doing a basement. Together you have to plan the work, educate subcontractors, and sell the concept. "You have to build a partnership between the building contractor and the concrete contractor—almost a strategic alliance—to make a successful venture out of the thing," says Pfanmiller.

mandating hurricane-resistant houses. "As soon as you start talking about building a more durable, better-lasting home, concrete is in an ideal position to fill the bill," he says.

Mercedes Homes and Heuser have capitalized on this market, and business is growing rapidly. In 16 months, Heuser's crew has gone from pouring one house a day to four a day, and he expects to be doing five a day soon.

The promise of such high demand is alluring for people like Carpenter in Ohio. "We think there's a market there," Carpenter says of Florida, and Ball Brothers is exploring southern expansion possibilities. Sauter says another concrete contractor—Walls Are Us, in Wisconsin—is also considering a move to Florida.

In North Carolina, Pfanmiller is working hard to establish a healthy concrete

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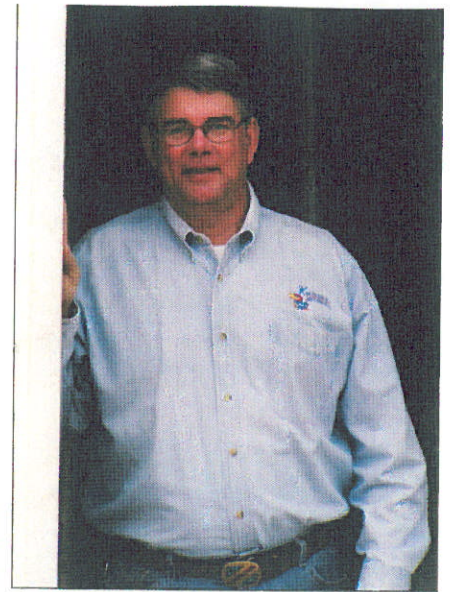
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home market. Home builders have been slow to come on board, but the company has built a few homes, some on its own. "The true carrot," says Pfanmiller, "is going to be that retirement home village where we have two or three plans and can get some repetition going."

To date, Pfanmiller hasn't found the carrot. But he's looking, and he remains convinced that poured walls are the way

to go in almost any market. You can sell energy efficiency in cold climates, storm resistance at the beach, quality construction for upscale residences, durability in subsidized homes, and blast-resistance for military housing. Pfanmiller's company has only touched two of those markets, and he's excited by the possibilities. "We get goose bumps every time we think about it." ■



While David Pfanmiller tries to convince builders that concrete homes are a viable alternative, his company has begun building a few homes on its own to get the word out. Marketing challenges aside, Pfanmiller remains convinced that poured walls are the way to go.

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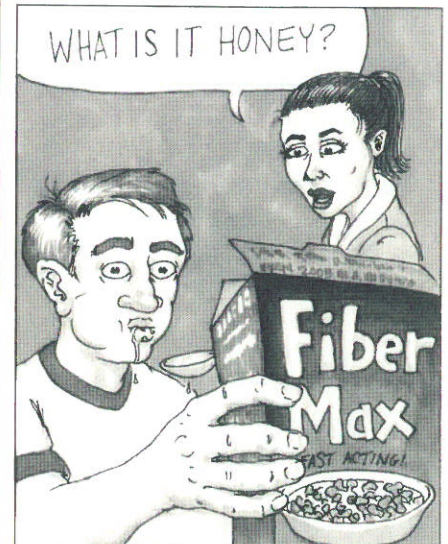
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