


Julie & Don Herndon

CLASSIC WOOD FLOORING

KEEPS FOCUS ON CUSTOMERS

BY DEBBIE SHANNON



When Don Herndon was courting his wife, Julie, 17 years ago, he sent flowers to her office weekly to show her how much he appreciated her.

Today, Don and Julie, owners of Classic Wood Flooring, at 3115 Aspinwall Avenue in Rockledge, which is near Suntree, are still sending flowers to the special people in their life – every time a floor installation job is finished, a beautiful bouquet of flowers from Eau Gallie Florist arrives on their customer's doorstep.

Julie, too, still gets flowers from Don. He planted her a rose garden at their Melbourne home, and her vases are filled with fresh flowers.

The Herndons have a tremendous amount of love and respect for one another and it is obvious when you meet them that this is why their company has become so successful. In eight years, their business has boomed and they have moved from a tiny 900-square-foot shop into an expansive 6,000-square-foot showroom, with over \$5 million in annual sales.

They have a staff of 24 including seven installation crews, all trained by Don, and they install about 1,000 floors a year. "No job is too small," says Don. "We do foyers or entire first and second floors." While most of their jobs are residential, they recently installed an Anderson hand-sculpted hickory and maple floor at Tuscany Grill in Melbourne. Classic Wood Flooring is the largest Anderson dealer in the state of Florida.

TEAMWORK MAKES DREAM A REALITY

They both say it took an incredible amount of teamwork to make their dream a reality. "I would not be here if Julie wasn't with me," he said.

When the couple first met, Don was a floor installer for Sears and Julie was working in a dental office. Don installed flooring at Julie's house and they were cordial to one another. Several years later, after both were again single, they met again. Julie had a little girl and Don had a son and a daughter. Don was getting ready to move to the Virgin Islands, when they ran into one another in a restaurant. "So much for St. Thomas," laughed Don.

At first, they were just friends. Don is 17 years older than Julie, who graduated from Eau Gallie High School in 1980. Her family, the Morans, still live in Brevard County. "I was one when he graduated from high school in 1962," she said. "But, our love grew and the next thing you know we wanted to get married."

At the time, Don was installing floors for companies like Sears and Home Depot. "He was making others look good," said Julie. At the end of the 20th Century, wood flooring became popular so the couple decided to "take a chance."

In 1999, they opened shop in a tiny building on Suntree Boulevard and it took three years before they could afford to hire their first salesperson. "We worked seven days a week and we brought my daughter, Alicia, here after school and we worked passionately because we believed in what we were doing," said Julie.

Their biggest obstacle was educating people about the product and that "you could have wood flooring in Florida." They attended home shows and spoke with builders about wood flooring. "Up north, people remember sanding and waxing wood floors, but no more, the wood is engineered and it is an easy floor to maintain – easier than tile," said Don. "Fifteen years ago, the product was not as good as it is now; the industry has improved."

Convinced that they could make it on their own, Don did all the installations, while Julie met with the customers and handled the finances. "We took out a second mortgage on our house to open the door," said Don.

While they worked long hours only eight feet away from each other, Julie says they have never argued and they share the same values, like always putting the customer first. "We are lucky that we don't have to work on our relationship," said Don. "It's easy," said Julie. "We can concentrate all our efforts on our customers."

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FLOORING DISPLAYED IN IMPRESSIVE SHOWROOM

This is primarily a male dominated business run by what Don calls the “good old boys” and he says sales reps and builders were, at first, reluctant to work with Julie. “They’d ask for me and I’d say, ‘There’s the lady who runs the place and signs the checks,’ so they now look for Julie,” laughed Don.

In 2003, wood flooring became the fastest growing segment of the flooring business and the Herndons found themselves cramped in their small office, now that they had five employees. They warehoused their products in three different locations and realized it was time to consolidate.

They spent three years searching for a new location and finally found a 1.1 acre overgrown lot on one of the only true hills in Brevard County. They called the number on the “For Sale” sign but got no answer for months. When they realized the area code was outdated, they found the owner in Titusville. “He had listed it 20 years ago and he wanted the same amount; it was on a ridge with a river view and we couldn’t believe it,” he said.

The deal was sealed and now customers marvel at the hundreds of wood samples installed on the floor of the cozy 6,000-square foot showroom. There are so many selections to choose from that it is overwhelming. “Not to worry,” says David Hoag, who has been the office manager for two years. Hoag, who says, “I am really glad I’m here because they treat everybody well,” says salespeople will work closely with you to design your floor. You can choose from hundreds of hardwood and laminate samples, many on display on the gorgeous floor installed by General Manager Roger Cardew. The intricate design includes traditional woods like hickory, oak and maple as well as exotics like jatoba, wenge and Santos mahogany.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Today, most people prefer dark stained, five-inch planks and hand-scraped textured flooring. There is also a resurgence in multiple three, five and seven-inch plank widths versus the two and a quarter-inch strip floor width. While the wood is beautiful, Julie says the secret to a beautiful floor is the crew’s attention to detail. “It is the installation that makes it,” she said.

Don, who humbly admits to being one of the most conscious installers in the business, says 85 percent of the complaints that mills receive are installation related. That is why his crews receive installation training and attend seminars on a routine basis. He takes pride in his crews and trusts them, a big issue for wood flooring business owners because these installers often spend days in someone’s home. “Every one of my installers has a key and the alarm code to my business and they are all clean cut and sober,” he says.

Chris Burton, owner of Christopher Burton Homes, Inc., has worked closely with Classic Wood Flooring since he opened his business nine years ago. “They did my first wood floor and I use them exclusively,” he said. “They are awesome to work with and the two of them are absolutely, without question, our number one vendor.”

Burton, who builds high-end custom homes, says they have a close personal relationship. “It is refreshing when you are dealing with people in this business to know that Don’s word is everything – you don’t need quotes,” he said.

He says he has seen Don do things that he didn’t have to do to please a customer. “He always does the right thing, even if it is at his own expense and literally, I have never, ever had an issue with his service, warranty or product and this is not something you can say about most companies,” Burton said.



Don and Julie agree that their company has been so successful because of word-of-mouth advertising. "If a customer is happy, we ask them to please tell someone else," said Don. "And we make sure that our crews are aware of this because they like to get a pat on the shoulder and positive reinforcement." On display is a photo album stuffed with thank you cards and notes from satisfied customers.

Don, who worked for large home improvement stores in his early years, says he "loves the competition between the chains. We have so much knowledge about this industry that we are set apart from them," he said. "While they may advertise a lower price, in the end it will cost you the same – we blow them out of the water."

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED

Anyone who owns a small business knows that to be successful you must work long hours. Still, the Herndons find time for themselves and others.

They are active in the Candlelighters organization and they recently installed a floor at the My Refuge children's shelter in Melbourne. "My installers volunteered their time and they were paid in hugs," said Don. They gladly donate wood flooring to not-for-profit fundraising auctions.

Don enjoys gardening and deep-sea fishing, while Julie relaxes at Pilate's Edge in Melbourne. They have so much confidence in their staff that they are now able to travel to destinations like the Caribbean.

The future looks bright for wood flooring. They recently purchased the property behind their existing showroom and they are building a large warehouse so they can expand their showroom. Julie says that Classic Wood Flooring has no plans to establish other locations.

"Bigger isn't necessarily better," she said. "Our priority is taking care of the customer, not getting bigger and paying more bills." Don nodded in agreement. "Don and Julie are here and that's why we are so successful," he said. "If we opened another store, Don and Julie would not be there." ♦



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