

Business

Monday, February 1, 2016

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THINGS ARE REALLY **LOOKING UP** FOR MARK WILSON AND LONDON BAY HOMES

LOGAN NEWELL/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS (3)

Mark Wilson, head of London Bay Homes, stands Friday in a model home in Naples.



The master bedroom of one of London Bay Homes' model homes, top, and the home's exterior, above. When the recession struck, president and CEO Mark Wilson was forced to cut staff of London Bay Homes from 80 to 20. With the housing market's rebound, he's been able to grow his company once again and now has about 120 employees.

■ The Naples homebuilder, named one of the nation's best in 2008, regroups stronger than ever after the recession

In 2008, Mark Wilson was named one of America's Best Builders by Builder magazine, a Washington, D.C.-based national trade publication.

But even as he was being celebrated, the housing market was already crumbling in Southwest Florida, and the fallout hit the custom homebuilder hard.

Permits were down dramatically throughout the region, and Wilson didn't sell a single home between October 2008 and February 2009.

"Everything after that was a real struggle," said Wilson, 56, president and chief executive officer of Naples-based London Bay Homes.

Wilson, who had founded the company in 1990 with his wife, Gemma Wilson, was forced to shrink his staff to 20 from 80.

To raise cash, he also sold 20 percent of his company to a wealthy investor, whom he declined to name, who had bought one of his homes.

Both decisions were "incredibly painful," Mark Wilson recalled — but they also put him in a position to survive the downturn.

Having raised \$17.5 million in the sale, he had the capital to buy cheap land and other assets as other homebuilders and developers folded or fled.

"I realized that this might be one of the best opportunities I'd ever see in my lifetime to buy stuff," he said.

In 2009 he bought more than 100 lots in Mediterra, a 1,700-acre luxury golf course community in North Naples that was then 9 years old, and took over sales and marketing operations from the financially troubled developer, Bonita Bay Group.



See **WILSON, 5B**



LOGAN NEWELL/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

Mark Wilson, head of London Bay Homes, walks through a model home Friday in Naples.

WILSON from 1B

He also bought scattered lots in Old Naples and high-end communities such as the Estuary at Grey Oaks.

In 2010 he bought the remaining 86 lots at the Founder's Club, a private golf course community with 262 homes on 700 acres in Sarasota.

Buying land at the bottom put London Bay in a sweet spot when the housing market finally started to turn, and eventually boom.

Now Mark Wilson has about 120 employees and his company — which also offers design and remodeling services — is growing.

In the Naples area, homes range more than \$1 million. Many feature trendy features like backlight floating ceilings, butler's pantries, catering kitchens and cafés off the breakfast bar.

And while he's "fairly bullish" about the strength of the luxury market in the near term, he's doing what he can to protect his company should the economy take another nose-dive.

"I have a clean balance sheet," Mark Wilson said. "Before the recession I had more debt."

Mark Wilson learned the building business at a young age. A native of Birmingham, England, he started

working as a teenager during the summer for his father, a commercial builder and golf course developer.

"I did all the dirty jobs, like carrying stuff for the bricklayer and sweeping out messes," he recalled. "As soon as anyone learned I was the boss' son, I was given all the ugly jobs."

He considered his father his mentor. "Unlike many CEOs who liked to be seen as the smartest guy in the room, he told me, 'I'd rather have smarter guys than I am around,'" he said.

Out of five children, he was the middle child — but he took a different path than his siblings, who pursued professions like accounting and law.

Mark Wilson studied civil engineering and soon got a job with Wimpey Construction, one of the largest construction businesses in the United Kingdom.

But he soon perceived the path to promotion was too slow and so decided to pursue a master's degree in business administration from Manchester Business School. He wrote a thesis on investment in real estate in the United States.

And he soon was able to put what he learned to practice when he joined his father's firm and traveled to Southwest Florida to scout opportunities.

"I found the can-do mentality of the United States very appealing," he said.

But by 1990, he and Gemma Wilson, whom he had met in high school, were ready to try something new.

They decided there was an open niche in the luxury market, building homes that weren't just big boxes but also with a high level of detail and materials.

They started building in Fort Myers and by the mid-'90s were building homes for high-end executives in Naples.

Gemma Wilson retired from the business after a decade. Mark now runs the company with his brother Stephen Wilson, who is vice president and chief financial officer.

After 25 years the company has won more than 200 awards for design and architecture.

But Mark Wilson says he is just as interested in developing and retaining top-notch employees as he is in creating new designs.

About 18 months ago, he created a corporate wellness program that includes access to a dietitian and a physician specializing in lifestyle health management, and he subsidized gym memberships and wellness-inspired educational sessions.

"I've been to Canyon Ranch and have had access to health screenings and wellness programs," Mark

Wilson said. "I realized my employees needed these things, too, to decompress and live more balanced lives."

A fitness enthusiast, Mark Wilson is a cyclist, sailor and high-altitude climber, and he enjoys traveling the world with Gemma. He has climbed peaks in the Alps and the Himalayas, and has scaled Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

For their 25th wedding anniversary, Mark and Gemma Wilson celebrated with a monthlong trip through Southeast Asia.

"I always bring my camera and get design ideas wherever I go," he said.

While the couple have no children, both are supporters of the Guadalupe Center, which provides educational programs for more than 1,100 impoverished students in Immokalee.

Besides raising funds for the center, Mark Wilson has taken his senior management team to tour the center and is encouraging his staff to become mentors and tutors to the students. He also wants to introduce students to career opportunities in architecture and construction.

Mark Wilson said his approach to philanthropy is like his approach to his business — hands on.

"I could just write a check, but that's not very rewarding," he said.