



## BUILDING TRADES

Chasing the wind blew Steve Sisler in the right direction

**Steve Sisler owns Sisler Builders, a construction company he started in 1983 that focuses**

on new homes, home renovations, and energy efficiency. He earned a degree in industrial economics, a combination of engineering and economics courses, from Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. He lives in Stowe with his wife, Sharon, and their Jack Russell terrier.

Their two grown sons are also in the construction business. Nick

is a founder and lead engineer at Ekotrope, a software firm that offers solu-

tions for designing energy-efficient buildings.

Luke is a site supervisor for Sisler, currently working on the Lift Line project at Spruce Peak.

**How did you end up in Stowe?**

I was in the Virgin Islands training to be on the U.S. Olympic windsurfing team when a friend asked me to help him build a spec house in Stowe Hollow. I didn't like the Virgin Islands, so I left and came to Stowe to be onsite foreman. I lived in a tent on the job site and then moved into the building. Fortunately you didn't need a certificate of occupancy back then. After we did a second house in Robinson Springs, I decided to stay in Stowe.

**What started you in the construction biz?**

I knew I wanted to do construction when I was 14. My dad was a professor of agricultural economics and a hobby woodworker. His father was a master carpenter and I still have his apprentice project tool chest in our living room. We built boats and did Adirondack guide boat repairs and made furniture. My mother was involved in historic preservation. She was working with an organization called Historic Ithaca and they took on a project called the Clinton House, an upscale hotel built in 1829 in Ithaca, N.Y., where I grew up. She needed cheap labor so I started working there during high school.

**What is Sisler Builders' project scope?**

Primarily residential and maybe some light commercial, but it depends on the project. I don't like a lot of windshield time, so I decided that Sisler Builders would do a wide range of residential projects in a small geographic range. The wide range of projects can be anything from a \$7,000 timber-frame woodshed to a house we are currently working on at Spruce Peak that is approaching \$20 million.

**What is the most challenging house you've built?**

Challenging can be defined in a couple of ways. It can mean meeting the budget, logistics, site conditions, material choices, implementation of architect's direction. The project we are working on at Spruce Peak is probably

the most challenging on many levels. Logistics are difficult because it's a steep and small site, the engineering is complex, and there are subcontractors the architect brought in we hadn't worked with before and we've had to foster working relationships with them. Because of site restrictions a lot of the main floor is essentially outdoors, above ground, which requires creativity for heating systems not freezing from below. It is most challenging from technical and timing perspectives.

**What is your favorite house you've built?**

We built a house off Ring Road in Waterbury Center. The owner and I are friends and our friendship has gotten stronger since building the house. He's a software dude and appointed himself architect. He was enthusiastic, engaged, creative, and we built an awesome house together. He and his artist wife had a strong vision and a creative eye. They were trying to mimic the skyline with the roof elements, and they achieved that. One interesting challenge was integrating an indoor, inground pool into a ledge. What was fascinating is that we blasted ledge and the pool is within 18 inches of it. It's a favorite because we had a good client, the relationship was enhanced, and it was challenging. It was done in phases over two years and it is spectacular, with 200-degree views.

**What is your favorite type of client?**

I like someone who's engaged, enthusiastic, intelligent. We are doing homes for financially successful people, so they are able to build high-quality projects. I like people who push our envelope to come up with creative solutions. I enjoy problem solving unique challenges.

**What important changes have you seen in the construction industry?**

Most important are the changes in communication technology. Now if you have a question you can take a picture, send it to the customer, and get an answer in 20 minutes. It has accelerated the building process and diminished costs because you're not waiting around for decisions. Another improvement is in insulation. We can now create very tight thermal envelopes without a huge change in price. Also, globalization provides access to more materials from different parts of the world that are more durable. For example, ipe decking, a product that comes from the Brazilian rainforest, has a 50- to 55-year lifespan if you do nothing to it. It was barely known when I started. Now it's readily available.

**Does making a home energy efficient make it unaffordable?**

If you don't make it energy efficient it's going to cost you more over the long term. It's a value assessment choice. Do you want to spend money up front, or do you want to pay more

money over the course of the life of the house? You can also make cost-effective choices with new products that are super efficient. The passive house movement is good, but the standard is so high you are spending too much at the front end to save over the course of the ownership of the house. We try to optimize the choices. What are the best insulation values to achieve the lowest cost? It's an untenable choice to make an inefficient house, so we value assess and put money in certain areas.

**What is the company culture?**

One of the main tenets is to treat others the way you would like to be treated. I like people who show some interest in who I am and what I do. We have approximately 30 employees and I try to reflect that tenet and do the same with them. I treat them respectfully and I try to let them know I care about their personal situations and concerns. I'm not a micro manager. I delegate, expect people to make decisions and do things, and if they do something different, as long as they have good reasons, I will support them. I don't want people standing around waiting for me to make a decision. The crew likes each other. I've fostered a multigenerational staff. You need to have new people coming in to achieve a long-term vision.

**Big picture person or detail person?**

Both. I can take the big picture and drill it down and hone in on the details. I lean more toward big picture, but have the ability to get highly detailed.

**After 35 years, to what do you attribute your success?**

It's a balance. I've worked hard and continue to work hard. I derive satisfaction in building relationships and I do the work to maintain them. A number of my former clients have remained friends, and I consider that to be an indicator of success. My wife, Sharon, has been a good sounding board for me. As a former IBM employee, she has the big company picture and I have the small company picture and she's been good for me in that regard. I believe in fulfilling commitments and promises. I'm definitive, say what I'm going to do, and deliver.

**What do you do in your spare time?**

I've always played outdoor recreation sports, primarily hockey, and I'm a driving instructor for the Porsche Club of America. I teach about 30 days a year at various race tracks around the Northeast. I'm kind of a car nut. The car hobby is something I've always enjoyed. I've put a lot of energy into it and it's fun. The adrenaline of driving a car on a race track is similar to cultivating a new client. Be focused, be aware, and look out ahead. ■

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