



Written by Arthur Treff

Photos courtesy of Medallion Pool & Anthony Harden

Success is just below the surface

I recently found a local artist who sculpts all manner of mountain land. With pen and shovel, he blends earth, sky and water into a functional, natural habitat. I found him in a retail pool store bearing the sign: Medallion Pool.

Beyond the displays of hot tubs, giant photographs of amazing backyards and samples of pool appliances, is the office of Mark Dorsey, owner of the company and one of the most talented water shape designers in the world.

Scratch a successful entrepreneur, and you'll usually find childhood stories just below the surface. It is here that you'll discover a repeated string of life-shaping events, which have steered him toward success.

He isn't a recent transplant from Monaco or Milan, and no blue blood runs through his veins. Mark and his wife, Lynne, grew up here in Western North Carolina and have discovered what they are very good at: designing and building luxury water shapes.

For instance, do you remember your first day as a licensed driver? I do. I became hopelessly lost on roads that I'd seen all my life from windows of the family car. Mark Dorsey did too, but his navigation was compounded by another variable.

Minutes after Mark announced that he'd passed his driving test, his father gave him two things: the keys to the family car and a set of blueprints. He was to drive to the Hardees parking lot in Biltmore — which had just been paved — and lay out the parking lines for painting. His younger brother accompanied him on this adventure.

“My dad had unlimited faith in his four sons. On my first striping job, he handed me the drawings and told me to ‘just get it done’. Working for him throughout high school was great training for the rest of my career. I had hundreds of experiences in solving problems, interfacing with people, and working hard.”

Children who are given responsibility usually put those events to good use for a lifetime. Eager to build upon his paving experiences, Mark enrolled in the civil engineering program at NC State.

Summers existed to finance their educations, so Mark, and his three brothers continued striping parking lots and roads for their father. Since he was also a civil engineer-in-training, Mark picked up additional work as a land surveyor.

After graduation, Mark worked as an engineer for local firms for almost a decade. He gained experience in design of sewer systems, hydraulics, and concrete reinforcement. Eventually he found the tasks a bit dry: working with drawings, design tables and calculators in an office environment didn't inspire much creativity.

Civil engineering is the backbone of any quality construction activity. It's very important work, so Mark's designs and calculations had to be precise. His signature on a document assured that structures to hold back fluids or soil would last a lifetime.

The application of engineering theory came easily to Mark. As he reviewed site drawings he could visualize many more details than just plumbing, retaining walls, structural stresses and runoff. He saw how people could use the space, what worked, what didn't...what was attractive to the eye, and what blended with nature. His interest was widening beyond mere engineering.

Hungering for more experience, particularly in the field, where he could use his rapidly developing design skills, Mark began working for grading companies, who specialize in working with large tracts of land in difficult (steep) conditions.

It was in the grading business that Mark became a student of water...how it flows downhill, where it collects and how to contain it. He enjoyed the process of moving the earth to accommodate water, first on paper, then in the field. Intense involvement in his work had been a chronic affliction, so it surprised no one that Mark also began to run the heavy equipment on jobs that he'd designed.

Engineering duties were only part of his job description. He had to prepare bids for large jobs, as well as present them to customers. Explaining the numerous geological and structural details as well as the costs to his prospective customers was to become another large step up in his education.

Mark Dorsey became a man in demand within design and engineering circles. He was talented with engineering details, yet he stood out among his peers because of his vision; he could shape land and structures not only to perform their intended purpose, but also to be beautiful as well.

In addition to grading firms, Mark worked designing and constructing dams for a while, and he also did some bridge-work. All of these were experiences that have served him well when he has to place swimming pools on steep WNC hillsides.

Mark married Lynne Snelson, who was also exposed to business at an early age.

She's the daughter of, Alma and JB Snelson, the local entrepreneurs who started Leicester Carpet Sales out of the trunk of JB's car.

Mark helped Lynne and family at the carpet store from time to time. It was here that he learned more about the personal side of sales.

“Selling is helping people,” says Mark. “You do not sell someone, you help them. You find a need and you meet it. That's my philosophy, and I'm very passionate about that.”

Leicester Carpet continues to do very well. Mark and Lynne Dorsey sold their shares of the store to pursue other interests. During his civil engineering career, he crafted large tracts of land into roads, parks and neighborhoods but Mark wouldn't be satisfied until he'd created a development of his own, so he and Lynne bought 100 acres with some partners.

Keystones of the new development's value proposition were the amenities. Plans called for an elaborate clubhouse as well as a swimming pool. Mark lost himself in the details of designing this public space. It was during the construction of the pool that Mark and Lynne had an epiphany of sorts: they would go into business designing and building pools and the surrounding architecture.

An established company, Medallion Pool, was up for sale, so

“This is the ultimate civil engineering career,” says Mark. “Customers bring me ideas from scenes witnessed in nature, or water features they've seen at a resort. If I can dream it, then I can build it.”



the Dorseys purchased it as a way to get their dream moving. As soon as he bought the company, Mark saw large gaps in the way pool companies approached customers, in terms of design and installation.

The majority of pool contractors provided installation services for designs done by landscape architects they'd never met, on a jobsites they'd never seen. This was not a recipe for happy customers or quality work.

“A \$20K pool, if designed or installed improperly can become a \$100K nightmare years later. Pools are far more expensive to repair than poorly built houses...pool repairs are extremely invasive.”

The reason is simple. Pools contain prodigious quantities of water, which, are located very close to the house. Large-scale leakage can undermine the soil containing the foundation, rendering the house and surrounding structures unstable. Additionally, the repair process involves a lot of digging, which disrupts most of the landscaping, decks and patios.

Building residential water features does not lend itself to the standard house construction model, where a general contractor oversees several specialty subcontractors, for two reasons. First:

pools are usually considered an accessory or an afterthought to a house building company. Second: if the overseeing contractor isn't sensitive to pool design and the visual appeal of the whole yard, steps will be skipped, and the customer ends up paying for them over time.

Medallion Pool has repaired many such mistakes, and for this reason, they manage everything: the design of the pool and surrounding structures all the way through the installation.

This eliminates any gaps in workmanship, and one trade dropping the ball on another. Mark feels that they can deliver a superior quality product adding more value in the process, if he is allowed to manage the entire job.

“If, say, a customer has a smaller budget,” Mark says. “I tell them to let me design and build it...all of it, and let's design the whole yard to that budget, not just the pool. This way, it will come out as planned, with no surprises, for the best value.”

Even now, Mark immerses himself in every design detail, and when the construction starts, you won't find him in the office. Oh no, you'll see him running heavy equipment.

When an engineer is far removed from the actual building process he cannot possibly plan for all contingencies. With Mark dig-

ging the footings he can immediately see if the soil quality is what he expected in his initial pool design. If it's not, he can react by tweaking the structure. If the soil is better quality than expected, he can save time and money there also.

This level of attention may seem strange to a pool installer from Florida, where the soil is sandy and the entire state is as flat as a pool table. Western NC is far from flat and the soil conditions vary wildly, but the biggest reason why Mark still digs the footings is because of his designs.

Mark's ability as an engineer allows his customers the freedom to let their imagination wander, to try something totally different. He designs pools that are nestled into rocky mountainsides, on tiny building sites with very little access for heavy equipment. Many are 'infinity pools' which seem to flow out over a distant vista with no visible means of support.

Medallion Pools are the ones gracing pages of glossy architectural magazines, and the book 'Swim' by Lynn Sherr. His 'Cloud Pool' was recently featured on an HGTV special, with more on the way.

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As an architect/engineer, Mark works at the edge of technology. This is an enviable position, for his designs are limited only by imagination. But, Mark is quick to point out that none of his designs would be possible without the support and trust of Medallion's customers.

He wants to design spaces that enhance the lives of those who use them, so Mark takes the time to fully understand family dynamics and how his customers plan to use the outdoor living area. The design path he follows is called functional design.

It's the process of responding to the needs and desires of the family who will use a living area, in such a way that allows their needs and desires to be met. Functional design is both an outcome and a process.

As an outcome, it describes a pool scape that works well to fit the customer's needs; as a process, functional design is a set of practices guided by the principles that deliver this positive outcome.

Water shapes, or pools, are living systems that go through changes like anything else that lives outdoors. They are subjected



to hot and cold, rain and snow. If low chemical use is high on a customer's list, this must be designed into the pool. If a pool scape is to be used year round, that must also be addressed on the drafting table, before the first shovel hits the dirt.

All his designs are fully automated, so at any time, Mark can check on his finished pools' health with a few simple mouse clicks. Sustainability is also built in from the beginning.

Real estate markets have been unpredictable lately, but not Medallion's business. They have a healthy backlog and continue to attract customers and accolades, not only from Western North Carolina but from other states as well.

For the near future, Medallion is working to close a service gap. There are no luxury pool companies servicing the Eastern Tennessee market, and they intend to fill it. Additionally, Medallion is working toward international business.

Their functional design process could easily accommodate a

customer, say, in Dubai. Mark could fly out for an initial consultation and a look at the job site, then follow up via phone and Internet. Once the design is approved, a Medallion construction manager could then fly out and oversee the installation.

Medallion Pool is a member of the invitation-only Master Pool Guild, an international association containing 108 members worldwide. Mark's architect/engineering credentials are rare, even within the Master Pool Guild. His skills continue to be Medallion Pool's secret weapon. As the accolades keep flowing in for the little company in Western North Carolina, you'll not see Mark resting on his laurels.

No, you're more than likely to see him 'resting' at the controls of a track-hoe by day, and nighttimes, hunkered down in his office designing another complex outdoor living space.

In between, he'll be dreaming of growing his business, because, he knows that if he can dream it, he can build it. ©

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