

Building hell

Acting as your own contractor requires a lot of patience and the ability to laugh, *Denis Grignon* found

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Go ahead. I dare you.

Be the general contractor for the construction of your own house and test everything from your fortitude to your marriage. That's what my wife and I did when we decided to build on a severed lot on her parents' farm near Lindsay, Ontario.

The torment started before we'd even cleared the site of cow patties – fitting metaphor, that. Because when the township clerk defended the \$2 000 development fee, which was \$2000 more than that of the neighbouring township with similar services, her words had a distinctly unpleasant odour.

It didn't get any easier after the paperwork, either. (Self-contracting tip #1: Yes, it CAN get worse.)

Good on you if you don't kick the dog or scream into a dial tone before that next tradesperson shows up. Or, as was my experience, doesn't show up. But it wasn't his fault. No, seriously. His truck broke down. Or was it his wife who forgot to pass on the message? No, hang on. Two employees called in sick. Rubella, possibly. And Monday was a holiday. In Tibet.

The Tradesperson's Giant Rolodex of Excuses is, I quickly learned in this contractor crash course, endless.

And some eight years after we broke ground – and almost our spirits – the, ahem, after-effects of the ordeal still linger like an itch in the back of your throat.

That's the thing about being your own general contractor; the house is never really finished and repairs are a constant work in progress.

But, unlike a house in a development, when repairs are needed, you can't take your complaint to that beige sales office at the quaint cul-de-sac. It's in your hands, pal.

If even a light rain means your windows leak – (every window in our house, for instance) – it's you negotiating between the installer and the supplier to determine who was at fault. To this day, I'm still not sure who was, but I know it wasn't me. And I'm sure that sentiment was shared by the next two trades people I hired to remedy the situation – both of whom bailed on me before the job was done.

Possibly because he bought my near-to-tears act

Okay, acting as general contractor wasn't a complete disaster. There were, in fact, some wise decisions and successes.

- **Do the simple work.** Any idiot can properly insulate a house. And any idiot did. I saved about \$1000 by stuffing those fiberglass bats in the walls and attic myself. Installing vapour barriers isn't rocket science, either. I'm no expert drywaller. But that didn't matter when I took on that task, with acceptable results, in the basement.

- **Know your limitations:** Conversely, there's no shame in admitting you're in over your head. I saved by sanding and staining the pine trim myself, but left its installation to a *real* carpenter.

- **Plugs o' Plenty:** And not just the electrical kind. We had many phone outlets, capable of handling up to six lines, installed throughout the house.

- **High and Mighty:** Rather than dig down deep, we only scraped the earth's surface then bermed up around the foundation – (with earth we dug for the pond). A higher grade means our sump pump doesn't work as often.

- **Don't get floored:** Knowing our flooring tastes would change after a year or two, regardless of how much we spent, we opted for an inexpensive construction grade. Today, we're extremely happy with the red pine flooring that replaced it.

(well, it was *mostly* an act) the supplier, at least, did upgrade our windows for free. But it still cost us \$1500 to finally find a wonderful carpenter – a neighbour, coincidentally - to install them properly. (Self-contracting tip #2: Silicone caulk is an inexpensive and wonderful thing).

Living in Smalltown, Ontario, too, made my role even more challenging. Indeed, it's tough denigrating shoddy workmanship when the guilty dunderhead might be on your wife's curling team. Never flip the bird to that oncoming van, which is driven by the guy who screwed up the eaves trough. Chances are he's also taking his son to the Beaver meeting that night.

And in a small community, the fraternity amongst trades people is that much more intimate. The Roofer-From-Hell I hired, for example, was recommended by that Carpenter-From-Heaven who fixed my windows.

Sadly, though, the guy he suggested did an even sloppier job than his predecessor. (Yes, this was a second roofer after the initial one made a mess of my roof's ridge cap). Snow was still blowing into my attic faster than you can say, "*FREEHOLD TOWNHOME.*"

It took weeks of ump-teen phone messages and faxes to finally reach Roofer Two to complain. (Self-contracting tip #3: Call display is now available in rural Canada. Use a different phone when hunting down delinquent trades people).

"No big deal," he assured me, with the same confidence my five-year-old exhibits when I catch him wolfing down his 11th Timbit. "It's perfectly fine if you have snow up there." An exchange with a trades per-

son who assumes I'm dumber than him, I learned, makes me dizzy. He never did show up for the 'callback' – a contractor's term for 'repairing their disaster.' And I have a hunch he wouldn't have known how to fix it, anyway, since he told me, "I don't know how to fix it."

Instead, I did my own research on how to repair it properly. (Self-contracting tip #4: Be resourceful. Fast). But it took six months of begging and pleading, which I'd become good at, to recruit the best roofer in the area to do the job. That I sometimes play hockey with John Hennekam - (the third trades person to climb my 45-degree roof, it should be pointed out) - was, I fervently believe, my bargaining chip. Goalies, even horrible ones like me, are in short supply in rural Ontario. And he'll likely need a last-minute net-minder this winter, as much as I needed the best roofer *before* this winter.

To be fair, dealing with delinquent trades people wasn't the only headache I suffered as a general contractor – (though it was the biggest). Many of my mishaps were my own doing.

With my architect cousin, we designed our two-storey saltbox house with a laundry room and bathrooms big enough for a pool table. Sure, it's a boon when I'm toweling off. But it means a smaller bedroom for our sons who are relegated to bunk beds until they move out or we undergo major renovations – which, sigh, would mean more trades people. (See all of above).

I also should have better monitored how those blueprints were being interpreted – or not interpreted, as it were. The framers put in a wall where plans called for an open stair-

case; that blunder didn't dawn on me until after the drywallers were done.

I also wish I'd chosen a better spot for the sump pump – a necessity where there are no sewers - which draws water away from the foundation. The corner of the basement closest to the pond would be better.

There were other mistakes, of course. But the angst of reliving them can be overwhelming. Someone told me it takes three houses before you've got this whole contracting thing figured out. I'm not so sure that's accurate – especially since that someone is a trades person.