

Vivian Smith

— *Smith Family Development*

Smith Family Development in Wheeling is just what the name implies — a family.

“Ours is a mom-and-pop family operation. We all wear many hats and know that we are not too good to do everything that needs to be done,” explains Vivian Smith, president and co-owner of Smith Family Development with her husband, Mark.

Capitalizing on an 11-year risk management career at Pepper Construction and its holding company, Vivian now runs the Smith Family Development office, writes the contracts, handles the legal and financing aspects and occasionally decorates a model. Mark is the visionary. He works with government officials and engineers on the development phase and supervises construction. The pair has been married for 34 years and has five children.

“In many companies, the owners are so many steps above the day-to-day operations that they didn’t know how to get back to basics when the economy crashed,” Smith stated. “When you are part of a small family business like ours, you do whatever you have to do to survive.”

When your family name is on the business, you also work your hardest and care passionately because you have pride in the family business, according to Smith.

During the recession, Smith learned just how much she can count on her family. Her oldest son, Jamie, after graduating from Northwestern University, went to work for the family firm, living at home and taking little or no salary for two years, because he was desperately needed.

Hard work and determination from all family members, along with the support of the village of Wheeling’s TIF District, is why Smith Family Development and its stately Prairie Park condominium community at 700 N. Wolf Road survived the lengthy recession and is about to start construction on a new eight-story building, which will complete the original plans at Prairie Park. A portion of the new property taxes on these units are paid back to Wheeling, funding the North TIF District.

This 70-unit building is 25 percent



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Vivian Smith is president of her family’s company, which is developing the Prairie Park condominium community in Wheeling.

pre-sold and will feature all hardwood floors in the entry, kitchen and living/dining areas, as well as tile-based showers, not fiberglass. There will be heavy glass swing doors on the showers and brushed nickel hardware for all the door handles and hinges, according to Smith.

“These furnishings were an upgrade in previous buildings, but are included in the prices of this new building. This new building, The Residences at Prairie Park, will also have nicer floor plans ranging from 1,581 to 2,318 square feet, an increase in size that is due to the demand for larger units,” she continued.

“You won’t find more solid construction with better insulation and sound barriers in any condominiums in the area. We started in commercial construction and transferred that design, construction and cost control knowledge to our condominium

construction and, in the end, our buyers benefit,” she said.

The Smiths see it as their mission to take open and underdeveloped pieces of land in Wheeling and help transform them into beautiful and high functioning residential and commercial properties.

For instance, the 17-acre Prairie Park was once a desolate piece of property that housed a fencing contractor who left pallets of different fences spread across the lot. The Smiths transformed it into a large green condominium project, using recycled crushed concrete as a base under the development’s roads and taking the water from an aquifer located on the property to create a gorgeous waterfall at the entrance to the community.

“We have a vested interest in the quality of life in Wheeling because we live here. We aren’t a developer that is going to build one project and move

Know them better

My first job was working for my mother, bussing tables and washing dishes at Doris’ Treetop Inn on Milwaukee Avenue. Since it was a family business, I eventually graduated to waiting tables and bartending. My mother had found herself a tavern owner when my father died at an early age.

The best part of my job is having satisfied clients who enjoy living at Prairie Park and enjoy living in the Wheeling community as we have for the past 33 years.

The best advice I ever received was to enjoy your career choice and be passionate about what you do, no matter what it involves.

I would advise young women considering a career in real estate to learn the business from the bottom up and once you know what you are talking about, never let anyone intimidate you. In today’s world, you cannot allow anyone to impose inequality upon you. If you do not achieve, it is because you are not self-motivated. There is always a way to achieve your goal, but you need to remember that compromise is not a dirty word.

My advice to builders is to treat your subcontractors and employees like family and they will work incredibly hard for you and you will deliver a more consistent, quality product to your clients.

In 10 years I would like to see my children running the company. But if they choose another path, so be it.

on. We aren’t leaving our community. We are building and doing business to the best of our abilities every day and giving a high level of custom design to our clients without gouging them,” Smith stated.

“We really care about our community, our business and our family, so we put in a lot of time and elbow grease. Work always comes home with us and all of our children have been involved in one way or another,” she said.

The Smiths hope to plan an additional two condominium buildings on seven acres they own just west of Prairie Park. They also hope to develop 17 acres of land they own along Lake-Cook Road as a multi-use development, Smith said.

— Jean Murphy