

Vivian Smith

- Smith Family Development

"We have a vested interest in the quality of life in Wheeling because we live here"

You won't see Vivian Smith of Smith Family Development in Wheeling driving a fancy car around the town in which she was raised. You are much more likely to see her pulling weeds in the gardens at her firm's Prairie Park condominium complex or attending a real estate closing, meeting with bankers or working at a Wheeling High School Boosters event.

"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. Mark and I also realize that we don't need the gadgets and fancy cars," Smith said.

That, 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.

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 the village and the engineers on the development phase and supervises construction. The pair has been married for 33 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, 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.

"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. I am

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 getting a closing done smoothly. But I also enjoyed decorating a model totally by myself a few years ago on less than a \$5,000 budget for interior decorations. We won a Gold Key Award from the Home Builders Association of Greater Chicago, even though I have no interior decorating experience.

The best advice I ever received was when a former employer's wife told me "an aggressive woman is considered a b*##*# while an aggressive man is simply considered aggressive. Never stop being aggressive!"

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.

My advice to builders is to treat your subcontractors and employees like family and they will work incredibly hard for you.

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

on the computer until midnight many nights and if something happens at Prairie Park, we are usually there before the property manager, simply because of proximity," she explained.

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



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Vivian Smith of Smith Family Development in the fitness center at Prairie Park in Wheeling.

Park was once a desolate piece of property which 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 it going to build one project and move 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.

When the recession hit, Prairie Park had 80 units unsold. Only 24 of those remain unsold today as buyers, primarily empty nesters and successful young professionals, are entering the marketplace again and gravitating toward luxury condominiums with heated garages.

"We have been busier in December

and January with showings and contracts than we were at the height of the boom. This horrible weather seems to be making people who have been sitting on the fence about selling their homes get into the market because they don't want to shovel snow anymore and they want a secure home so that they can leave it and go someplace warm in the winter. So they are shopping with us and liking what they see," Smith explained.

"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 still have plans for one more 66-unit building at Prairie Park and also hope to build 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.