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IN MY OPINION

For Bob Fetzer, an opportunity for good



DAN SMITH

Building Specialists, and budding TV star.

If you've become aware of Building Specialists in recent days because of its major role in the production of the ABC television show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," you're not alone. But Bob's company has been working effectively, profitably, creatively and with admirable ethical and environmental soundness for 30 years.

Building Specialists put together the construction of what became a \$400,000 home for a Blacksburg single mother and dance instructor with rapidly advancing multiple sclerosis. It's a great story of cooperation in the construction community, members working with a worthy goal in mind. And it isn't a bit surprising that Bob Fetzer, owner of a small construction firm, would take on a task that at least one large firm shrunk from.

On the day before the action began in earnest, Bob sat there with me in his meeting room, trying to eat lunch and talk at the same time, all the while watching the snow fall and hoping to get to Blacksburg to prepare to tear down the old house in a couple of hours. His endorphins seemed at their upper levels as he spoke—the plastic spoon of soup approach-

ing his mouth, stopping, going back into the bowl uneaten. His pace was rapid and precise as he tried to credit just about every one of the 1,000 builders and their companies taking part (that doesn't count an endless stream of volunteers) in one way or another. He rattled off an impressive number of names and even included a few who declined to participate, as his veggie wrap sat there awaiting a healthy bite.

Bob put together this coalition of the willing in hours, pulling from a career of good will, asking some people he didn't even know to contribute time and materials to this project. His company, he says, contributed efforts valued in six figures (around \$175,000, he estimates), but others were tossing in solid chunks of in-kind change, as well (Bob wanted me to run a list of them; I told him there were far too many).

The house was to have been built in 107 hours and it meant tearing down a \$140,000-plus existing home that was on multiple levels—making it difficult for the stricken owner to navigate—and replacing it with a custom-designed and custom-built single-level home with a building out back for the owner's Zen exercises. It meant working with veterans and novices (Virginia Tech architecture students, who did yeoman's work) and it meant putting "fast track construction" on steroids.

All this was accomplished during hunting season, a time when construction general contractors, vendors and subcontractors might as well close because their employees are in the woods. The larger contractor



Dan Smith

Bob Fetzer: You'd have expected it

who refused the work apparently blamed hunting season for the decision.

But Bob was as confident as circumstances allowed while he put the last pieces in place, worrying that this one or that one would drop out at the 11th hour when the volunteer fully realized what he was volunteering.

Bob comes from giving stock. His father—a city councilman—and mother were deeply involved in Elizabethton, Tenn., where he grew up. Bob, a good high school football player, wound up at Carson-Newman College as a linebacker, but when he discovered that playing college football meant giving up about \$1,000 in income from summer work in construction, he had to reconsider his future.

He wound up graduating at

East Tennessee State, getting a divorce and moving to Roanoke. Up to this point, he had worked in carpentry and drywall, digging ditches and doing common labor, toiling as a janitor and compiling knowledge and skill at the most basic levels. He hooked up with Randy Hendrick and formed a cleaning service (Cleaning Services Ltd.) and the company flourished, but Randy didn't like dealing with the vagaries of personnel and he moved on after two years, leaving the company to Bob.

With his background more in building things than with the bucket-and-mop brigade, Bob started doing more and more

maintenance and repair, working to upgrade apartments and "the business grew from that."

Recently, Building Specialists held its 30-year anniversary party at the Grandin Theatre, on which it served as general contractor a couple of years ago when the theater returned from its darkened state to become a first-rate independent movie venue. The theater was packed—packed elbow to elbow—with well-wishers, people who had grown to admire this unpretentious, modest, generous and genuinely nice man.

So it wasn't surprising to see Bob Fetzer surrounded by this swirl of activity whose goal was to make life a little nicer, a little easier for a good woman doing her best for her children and her community. No. That fit well on him.