A man in a grey hoodie and blue jeans is working in a workshop. He is using a hand plane on a large wooden surface. The workshop is filled with various tools, wood, and equipment. Shelves in the background hold boxes and other materials. The man is focused on his work, and the overall atmosphere is one of a busy, well-equipped wood shop.

# An enduring

*After seven years on the job, Jacquie Sharman has moved from general labour to being one of the skilled hands around the shop.*

**I**t was a business decision... sort of. Lyle and Lora Lea Harrison started Wolf Creek Cabinets in 1993 on the advice of the economic development office in Lacombe, Alta. They had moved to the area from Stettler, Alta., where Lora Lea had worked for 11 years in her father's farm equipment dealership. Lyle got his journeyman cabinetmaker ticket in 1984 and moved between working at larger shops in Red Deer and the oil fields before opening his first cabinet shop in Stettler. "There were four shops fighting over about three kitchens a year," Lyle says. Looking for a change, Lora Lea remembered that her father had always said he should have located his business on busy Highway 2 between Edmonton and Red Deer, so they asked the town of Lacombe what businesses it needed. One of the needs on the list was for a cabinet shop: a perfect fit. The two

brought their young daughter, Whitney, and set up shop in a building built by Lora Lea's father. Over the years, through word of mouth and a steady reputation for quality, business grew along with the town, all fueled by Alberta's booming economy.

Wolf Creek Cabinets consists of a small shop with an attached showroom. There are usually four workers, plus a 13-year-old boy who helps to sweep up, building custom cabinets for a market that extends about 100 kilometers to all sides. A table saw and an edgebander are the only floor-mounted equipment in the shop, and there is a small spray booth where Doug Krzywy has finished parts for 12 years. Right now, the Harrisons are looking for a new assembler, but Jackie Sharman is still there running the table saw as she has done for the last seven years. "She can optimize in her head better than any program I have ever seen,"

Lyle says. Both workers came into the company as unskilled labour and were trained and mentored to the point where they work almost entirely independently.

Lyle creates cut lists, does site measurements and delivers completed jobs, taking a hand in production only when the shop is short. Lora Lea sells and designs the cabinets. She also does the books at night, but the Harrisons are looking for an office manager to take over that task. Whitney is 23 now, and has almost finished her Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. She came in to help with the books two summers ago. "It was awesome," Lora Lea remembers, "because she had just finished all her accounting classes."

**Along with their strong** connections to the people working within the company, the Harrisons rely on



# partnership

enduring relationships for the help they bring in from outside. The shop itself was built by Lora Lea's father when they started up in 1993. He was retiring from his successful farm equipment business, and rented the shop to the Harrisons to generate some retirement income. Lyle and Lora Lea remember one of their first customers. "He was walking past our booth at the trade show because his house had burned down," Lora Lea says. "He stopped and told Lyle that he guessed Lyle needed the work because 'you are just as skinny as a coyote.'" That customer still drops by the shop, from time to time, today. One of the Harrison's few promotional efforts, their website, was made for them by a happy customer. "We tend to use people who we have done kitchens for because they care a bit more and they tend to do a good job," Lora Lea explains.

Lyle and Lora Lea have used

the same hardware and panel suppliers almost exclusively since they started. Again and again they have shunned the decisions that would take them away from the modest, client-focused business model they prefer. "My father used to say that growth for growth's sake is called cancer," Lora Lea says. Lyle still delivers every kitchen they make in order to ensure that everything is to the client's satisfaction and fits properly. "We use 5/8-inch melamine everywhere," Lyle says. "There are no 1/8-inch backs or 1/2-inch backs, no 1/2-inch drawer slides or 1/2-inch gables. There is no good one side, good two sides. I have a bin of 5/8 white melamine and a bin of 5/8 maple melamine. It is all really good, solid construction that way. We have yet to build with a metal drawer box."

As a traditional mom-and-pop shop, the conventional wisdom would suggest that they should be threat-

ened by the proliferation of such big box stores as Home Depot and Rona. Lora Lea gets a twinkle in her eye when she addresses that question. "Shortly after Rona opened we had a lot of people in here with proposals in their hands asking if we could match its prices," she says. "Our answer was usually, 'Yep, no problem!' The big boxes have actually allowed us to expand our profit margin significantly."

The duo's instinct for community has led them to become active members of the Canadian Kitchen Cabinet Association, which has, in turn, led them sources of inside information and industry knowledge that they may not have had access to in rural Alberta. Lora Lea says, "We like the meetings because guys from out east do not mind telling us stuff that we would never hear from anyone here. One fellow from New Brunswick sent me an email telling us how he han-

# An enduring partnership

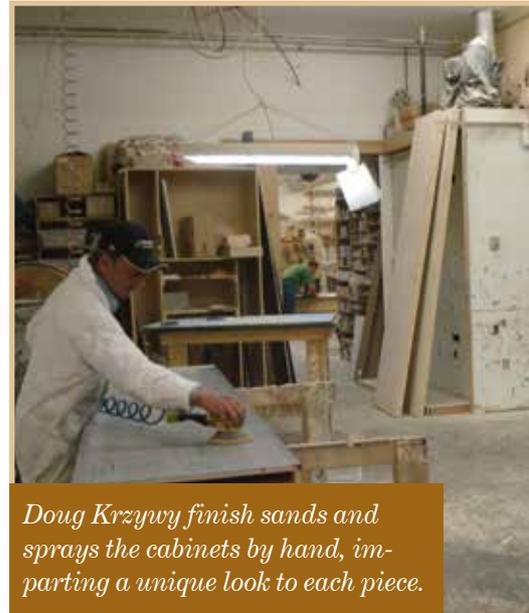
dles problem customers. I cannot go to [Red Deer-based] Westridge and ask, but guys from Ontario could not care less.”

**The Harrisons have** often felt the pressure to become more automated, but simply cannot square such a move with their goal of keeping the workload to a minimum and the profit margin to a maximum. “The CNC salesmen will tell you it is seamless, that you will start making money immediately,” Lyle says, “and that you can get rid of your saw and that you don’t need any skilled people to run it. I do a lot of solid wood here and I can’t do that on a CNC. I might possibly be able to get rid of somebody in the shop, but I would need somebody up here programming for even more money. If a CNC goes down, I would be bringing parts from Germany in-

stead of Lethbridge. I can pick up a table saw pretty quick even if mine were to melt on me.”

Lora Lea chimes in, agreeing: “Every time we go to a convention, they are beating into us what our profit margin should be and, I can tell you, we are doing really well. With a CNC we would need more room. Sales would have to go up to keep the CNC running all the time. Administration becomes heavier, and how do you catch mistakes? We prefer to stretch our profit margins and become more efficient rather than bigger.”

“We are working on 1/8-inch increments on our cabinets,” Lyle says. “It doesn’t matter to us if our standard box is 30 inches high, if you want it 31 inches, it is not that big of a deal. There is no one-inch increment, three-inch increment.”



*Doug Krzywy finish sands and sprays the cabinets by hand, imparting a unique look to each piece.*

Working together as husband and wife has been effective because of a few ground rules Lyle and Lora Lea learned growing up in families headed by entrepreneurs. “We definitely know who calls the shots with respect to which part of the shop,” Lora Lea explains. “We do not argue with each other. If he says he needs a

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*Lyle and Lora Lea have a standing agreement to leave work at the office, but that their enhanced level of communication gives them certain strengths.*



*The location, strategically placed between Edmonton and Red Deer, has been key to Wolf Creek Cabinets' success.*

piece of equipment then I say, 'how much?' because I am the money person, but he says what it is because he runs the shop. If there is an issue we have to talk it out because after work we go home and sleep together. When we go home we try not to talk about business. A lot of times we are not here at the same time. So when we go home, if we have not seen each other all day, we wind down, have a glass of wine for an hour or so and talk about what happened that day. But that is it; we do not talk about it anymore until we get back to work."

Lora Lea thinks this enhanced level of communication and familiarity gives them certain strengths over shops where designers and production staff have little contact. "I can certainly draw a cabinet that Lyle says can't be built," Lora Lea admits. "I have, several times. Because we are so close, if there is an installation problem I hear about it immediately. He can come back to me and say, 'that is the most ridiculous design I have ever seen.' The next time something similar comes in, I can try to avoid those mistakes."

Now in their early 50s, the Harrisons are looking forward to the time when they can spend more time golfing and perhaps even pick up a winter place in Arizona. Asked to sum up the secret to their successful partnership, Lyle says "I do not know. I guess we must love each other." 🍀

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