

TV celebrity launches building foundation

By Laura Severs - Business Edge
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Photo courtesy of Holmes on Homes

Mike Holmes is laying a foundation that could ultimately change the Canadian building industry.

This contractor is on a mission, one that extends beyond his popular Holmes on Homes TV series on HGTV, where he's known for making it right by correcting botched residential construction and renovation jobs.

Holmes has just launched the Holmes Foundation, which has an objective of ensuring that all residential renovation and construction in Canada is done right - the first time.

The fix-it man with 20 years of professional experience doesn't believe that he has bitten off more than he can chew. After five seasons of shows where he cleans up after other contractors' mistakes, Holmes says a lot more needs to be accomplished than just assisting the small number of homeowners he can help each TV season in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Mike Holmes of Holmes on Homes is targeting substandard renovations.

"I have been fixing a lot of sloppy, lazy and dangerous work," says Holmes. "I want to raise the bar of the construction industry and stop the slow death of craftsmanship in this country."

His plan includes the introduction of a prototype state-of-the-art house that will serve as a model for similar homes to be built across the country; establishing a network of qualified professionals who will lend their services to families across Canada by undertaking to correct bungled renovation projects; and to encourage young people to pursue careers in the skilled trades.

That's where the charitable Holmes Foundation comes in.

Holmes decided it was time to move forward with the project after visiting a couple who wanted to add a second storey to their small bungalow. The renovation, according to Holmes, was a bad one and marks the first time the Holmes on Homes crew was faced with a situation where it would be easier to tear down an entire house rather than trying to fix what was there. Show viewers will be able to see the project in a special to be televised at the end of 2006 or in early 2007.

Holmes will raise the money for this project through the foundation, and build the house that will serve as the model for new homes across the country. The prototype is eco-friendly, energy efficient and resistant to fire, water and mould. It is designed to stand the test of time and is expected to meet LEED (leadership in energy and environmental design) Canada standards.

"I've designed for the (home) for the last year," says Holmes. "I swear every Canadian's jaw will drop."

But it will be a little while before others get to experience the home Holmes says could change the industry.

"We're approximately two years away," says Holmes. "What I'd like to do personally is build the first community in the GTA and, once that's done, I'm hoping that's enough to train all the people I need to and (then) run with Mike Holmes-approved contractors. It's in the works right now. I'm trying to find the best builders to get them to jump aboard on this."

The foundation is not limiting itself to helping others who are in need. It plans at least one residential renovation project a year in each province by using reliable local contractors, says foundation executive director Ingrid van Weert.

"In Canada, there is a desperate and growing shortage of skilled workers, and unless youth are encouraged to enter this employment field, all homeowners are making themselves increasingly vulnerable to unscrupulous contractors in the future," says van Weert.

To ease the shortage, she says the foundation will partner with schools, businesses and governments to raise the profile and reputation of all skilled trades in Canada, using Holmes' reputation to encourage young people to pursue careers in the skilled trades and to encourage employers to hire them.

Van Weert is already working with Ontario's Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, which has its main campus in Kitchener, to discuss working together on online courses. They are also in discussion about seeing part of Conestoga's expansion in Waterloo take on the Holmes name.

"We are thrilled to be moving ahead on this exciting partnership with Mike Holmes and the Holmes Foundation who believe in encouraging young people to pursue skilled trades," says Ingrid Town, executive director, development and alumni relations for the college. Town says some of the first online renovation technician courses will include components on safety, materials and tools, industry background, business ethics and "green" building and renovating.

The new Waterloo campus, in addition to the anticipated Holmes Apprenticeship & Skilled Careers Centre, will allow Conestoga to increase its plumbing programs to accommodate 192 students, rising from the current 120.

Carpentry could also grow from 144 students to 240 and the move of these trades from their Guelph campus will allow new programming in industrial and transportation trades at that campus.

Conestoga is hoping to start the renovation technician program at the Waterloo campus with an intake of about 30 students in September. "With sufficient support, the new campus will also allow us to develop other construction trades at this campus in the near future such as drywall and roofing," adds Town.

The foundation is also in talks with Skills Canada, a national not-for-profit organization that promotes careers in skilled trades and technologies to Canadian youth, about an ad campaign with Holmes as a spokesman for the association.

For Holmes, getting more young people into the trades is important.

"This is a big part of what I want to get into, putting the new kids in the right direction of apprenticeship and letting them know that it's a good career to be in," he says.

"Obviously we don't have enough good pros out there now."

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