

ABOUTFACE

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Portland's Interview Magazine

Home Design Issue

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Jamie Harris & Natalie Long

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JAMIE HARRIS & NATALIE LONG





Dynamic Duo Builders

written by By Kristine Thomas
photographed by Tim Sugden

When a woman telephoned a builder to let him know she would be using Elite Development Northwest to custom build her home, she was astonished at his response. The builder informed the woman she shouldn't use Elite Development Northwest because the owners were just two bored housewives with too much time on their hands.

The woman had done her homework and knew owners Natalie Long and Jamie Harris of Elite Development Northwest were exactly who she wanted to hire to build her dream home.

While disappointed at what was said about them, Natalie and Jamie aren't surprised. They've either heard it or dealt with it – from being called “the girls” and “Pixie Chicks” - Natalie is 5-feet tall and Jamie is 5-feet-1 - to having contractors ask to speak to their husbands about a project. While their husbands are both extremely supportive of their endeavors and will lend a hand when needed, they know their wives are the more than experienced to handle any building project that comes their way.

Friends since 1992 when Jamie was a freshman and Natalie was a sophomore at Portland State University, these two women are the quiet, yet fiercely competitive type – soft spoken and gracious but won't be pushed around. Their only concern is with what their clients' have to say about their work. And they prefer to let the quality of their work – whether it is a build, design or remodel project – speak for itself.

Natalie and Jamie have built only two homes for the NW Natural Street of Dreams – in 2010 and 2013. Both times they walked away with the prestigious award, Best of Show. At the 2013 NW Natural Street of Dreams at Stonehenge in West Linn, the home Natalie and Jamie built was called, Cuvée and described as entertainer's dream.

From the placement of electrical outlets – in the kitchen they are hidden under the cabinets so they don't interfere with the

beautiful backsplash and to make stringing Christmas lights a delight they are in the eaves – to the iPad that the owners can use to control everything from the waterfall to the Christmas lights to the thermostat and television, Harris and Long pay attention to the smallest details. There is a two-story wine room seen from various viewpoints and soaring bookcases in the library. From the lodge fireplace to the hand hewn timber trusses, Natalie and Jamie created the dream home the owner's desired. Unlike most houses at the NW Street of Dreams, their house wasn't staged, allowing the owners to move in shortly after the show was over.

Both women started by remodeling homes. From that experience they learned too often people live with things in their homes they don't like from carpet in the master bathroom to a house with a poor traffic flow.

To avoid that situation, they sit down with clients and ask every imaginable question – from where to they put their briefcase at the end of the day to how they use their kitchen. By asking the questions, they met the client's expectations.

What they take pride in isn't the accolades. Their joy derives from hearing the homeowner say what they created is exactly what they envisioned. They truly believe their clients should have a home that reflects who they are and is designed to meet the client's lifestyle. They have a talent for creating a seamless concept of livability with beauty. They incorporate the natural beauty of the property with the flow of the house. They average five projects a year with the average price of a newly built home being more than \$1 million.

Dynamic and dedicated, Jamie and Natalie have high expectations for themselves. And that transfers to what they deliver to their clients. Both women are dedicated to their families and have created homes that reflect their families' needs. Because they know how important it is to have a place of comfort and serenity – a place where they want to go at the end of a long day – that's what they create for their clients. So go ahead and call them Pixie Chicks – they believe building a house is something truly magical because they are capturing a dream and creating something wonderful.

Tell me a little about yourself.

Jamie: I am married to Sean and have three children: 11, 8 and 7. I enjoy spending time with my family, my mom and my sister. We spend a lot of weekends together and like to go camping, water skiing, snow skiing, playing games and just hanging out. When I am not designing floor plans, I like to read and spend time with my kids, who are super active. I live in Newberg with my family and am on the board of directors for the Home Builders Association.

Natalie: I am married to Chris and have four boys, 14 year old twins; 11 and 9. I have my bachelor's degree from Portland State University and my master's degree from George Fox. I live in Beaverton. With four boys, we are always involved in some kind of youth sport from football to lacrosse games. We like to snow ski and we like to eat, so we enjoy visiting interesting restaurants. I like to cook and I love to spend time with my family.

What inspired you to become builders?

Jamie: I was a project manager for a company where the whole time I knew I wanted to do something else. I think the creative side of me wanted to come out. I also wanted to start my own company so I could go on field trips with my kids. For our family, I remodeled a couple houses. I learned I was good at it and decided to remodel a house and sell it as an investment. It sold quickly, thanks to Natalie who helped me sell it. We went for a spa day and we started talking about starting our own company together.

Natalie: In 2000, my husband and I were remodeling a 1920s house that we took down to the studs. The house was 2,400 square feet. I learned I was good at making a budget, sticking to it and managing a job site. I learned I had a good eye for building and I sold the house for a profit.

How did you decide to become business partners in 2006?

Jamie: One reason we became partners is because we have a great friendship and we knew we could balance each other out. The hardest part was picking a name. We pulled out the *Thesaurus* and picked a name that meant we went a step above. Since we began working together, we have only had a few disagreements and over small things. That is how strong our friendship is for one another.

When you meet with a prospective client, what do you do?

Jamie: We ask lots and lots of questions including how they live their life to what their style is. Our goal is to address from the beginning how the client is going to live in their house and then create a house that reflects who they are. Our goals are to get to know our clients, to think outside the box to meet their needs and build a home that reflects who they are.



2013 Street of Dreams winner, The Cuvee. Wine closet, backyard waterfall, and den.



What lesson did you learn on your first project that you carry with you today?

Jamie: I learned to get three bids for everything to make sure I was getting a fair price. I learned to work with men who respected me and I started to establish a group of contractors who I could work with. I have always loved houses and selling the first house I remodeled for an investment purpose confirmed I could be a builder, especially since people told me they liked what I was doing.

Natalie: When I remodeled the first house, I had two-year-old twin boys and I was pregnant. I learned I had to be strong as a female and make sure the contractors delivered on the things they promised. I had a contractor tell me that he has never met another female quite like me. I have learned to state what I want and to stand my ground to make sure it happens.

How would you describe your work?

Jamie: Our signature is building quality, custom built, and elite homes. Our signature is our client's satisfaction. We can build a home that is modern to one that is rustic and everything in between. What we do well is listen to our clients and then create what the client wants. I love coming up with ideas no one else has thought of. Because our homes are custom built, we use many different architects. Our goal is to always meet the clients' needs. I think the reason people hire us is because we have something different to offer.

Natalie: We pay attention to the smallest details. We make sure the homes we build are meant to last. We stay on budget and we complete our homes on time.

Who is your role model or inspiration?

Jamie: I have a strong mom, Dianne Parent, who owns her own company. She has made a lot of wise decisions and she has inspired me. Both our moms have been really supportive and helped us with the Street of Dreams house.

Natalie: I have a great mom, Sherry Buff, who taught me to be a self-sufficient and independent woman. She taught me to take things one step further than people would expect and when debating an issue that whoever talks first loses. She taught me to know when to be quiet and know when to stand up for what I believe is right.

Describe what it means to have clients describe their dream house to you and then ask you to create it?

Natalie: When someone gives you their dream and asks then to make it come true, it is an incredible honor and a tremendous responsibility. Jamie and I are very serious about making what they want happen for them. And it's amazing to see their response when we do.

How was building your first Street of Dreams home in 2010 different to building your second in 2013?

Jamie: We finished our house this year in front of everyone. It's a challenge being one of six or seven women builders in the Portland area. The first time was definitely more stressful and this time things went smoother.

Natalie: For our first house, they watched us pretty close and they were a little worried. We heard a lot about "how are the girls doing or what's happening with the Pixie Chicks?" For our first house, we knew we were the underdogs and I think we were a little frantic. This time, we were calmer because we were more experienced. Both times, we had fantastic clients.

Has it been a challenge being a female builder in a predominately male field?

Natalie: I think our confidence has grown the more we have done this and it is not as bothersome when we hear a contractor say, "Ask the girls." We have interviewed some contractors who were not respectful to women so we moved on to a contractor who was.

What do you enjoy about owning your own business?

Jamie: The freedom and creativity. I like having more control over my days and balance in my life. I love houses and want to build homes that make people feel comfortable and at home. I want people to look forward to going home, that their home is their happy place.

Natalie: I like the flexibility that we can work late in the night and take off the next morning to do something with our children. I like being in control of my schedule.

Describe your working relationship?

Jamie: We are a great team because we both have different strengths. We allow each other to exercise our strengths and because we aren't competing for similar roles we rarely disagree. Our strong friendship makes a good foundation for our business. We just have a great deal of respect for one another.

Natalie: We are a good balance and we know each other's strengths. We are willing to take a step back if we know the other has that strength. If Jamie steps up, then I step back and vice versa.

What are your strengths and what are your business partner's strengths?

Jamie: My strengths are the creative side, thinking outside the box and creating things people haven't seen. I am able to sit down and dream with anybody about what they want and then help them create that dream. Natalie is great at making sure we stay on budget and on schedule.

Natalie: I am responsible for keeping the project on budget and on time. I am the one who steps forward if there is a conflict. I am good at figuring out why there is a conflict and getting it solved. Jamie has a vision that is beautiful and we keep moving toward that vision. **AFM**