



From Flipping Burgers to Building Dreams: Ken Cleveland is a True American Success



To learn how Ken Cleveland of Ken Cleveland Builders got his drive for success, you have to go back to the beginning – his rugged life in a small farming town called Charlton, Mass., to be exact.

Ken’s story begins like so many others: When he was a boy, he walked a mile to school, uphill (only one way, though!) – sometimes in snow so deep that the drifts nearly reached the telephone wires. His destination was a small country school with no indoor plumbing. And he worked countless hours at odd jobs after those long school days.

“I learned at a young age the importance of helping contribute to the family financially,” he said. It is that hard work-focused upbringing that got Ken to where he is today.

As a junior in high school at one of his first real jobs – a short order cook, sometimes up to 48 hours a week – Ken brought in just 50 cents per hour. “They liked me. I was a hustler,” he said. At another job, he was given a 25 percent raise on his weekly wages to reward his fast work just days after starting.

These early experiences – working around the clock and learning the value of hard work and dedication – helped shape the character that Ken is so well-known for today.

A Career in Motion

In 1953, a 20-year-old Ken came to Cleveland to learn a trade: He began an apprenticeship with a commercial builder, bringing in \$1.12 per hour.

As Ken finessed his skills, he became carpenter foreman, then superintendent. “My dad was on the first crew that I ever oversaw,” he said. “He’s where I get my strong will, so it was challenging at times, to say the least. I don’t know if he liked answering to a kid – especially his own.”

In 1960, Ken decided to go into business for himself. His mentor warned him, “It’s a tough road out there,” but that just pushed him harder ... and Ken Cleveland Builders was born.



Help others. Follow your heart. Love what you do and be the best you can be.

– Ken Cleveland

With a focus on residential construction, Ken Cleveland Builders made waves in the industry. Ken was always on the lookout for opportunities to expand and innovate. "I once took a personal trip to Florida, and ended up seeing an opportunity there," he said. The market for condominiums in that area was booming, and Ken wanted in. "We expanded and started building condos in Florida."

By the 1970s, Ken's business was one of the top 500 builders in the country, constructing more than 300 homes per year. At the time, the industry standard was to use sub-contractors. But Ken went against the grain and employed more than 100 tradespeople. Since his team worked in both Ohio and Florida, he was able to provide them with year-round employment.

"I was always watching the trends in California and other Western states. They were always two to three years ahead of us," said Ken, "so by following in their footsteps, I could offer home plans that no one else around here was offering." Ken introduced patio homes and zero-lot-lines to the Medina area, changing the footprint of how homes were built in the area.

Although Ken's focus has always been residential, he dabbled in commercial construction as well – including the Rea & Associates office in Medina.

The Next Chapter

At 81 years old, Ken shows no signs of slowing down. "I'm a workaholic. I can't sit still for long ... it's just who I am," he said. "But I'm getting older. That's the heck of it."

For a man whose generosity knows no bounds, his focus now is on sharing what he has and helping others. On his most recent birthday, he made a \$4 million donation to the Cleveland Clinic Brunswick Family Health Center – something he never dreamed of being able to do while flipping burgers at a greasy spoon in Massachusetts ... and something he never could have done if not for his strong will and work ethic.

So when Ken finally does settle down, his impact will be far from over. The Ken Cleveland Foundation will continue to give back to the community. Members of the community will continue to enjoy the Ken Cleveland Park. And avid readers can read a book about his life, "My Way: The Life and Times of Kenneth I. Cleveland."

"The only thing we get to take with us when we leave this world is what we leave behind. Help others. Follow your heart. Love what you do and be the best you can be," he said.