

Deck Builder *PRO*file



*Dean Collins, President
Collins Construction,
St. Petersburg, Florida and
Boone, North Carolina*

By Anne W. West



Dean Collins working on the master bedroom deck of his vacation home in North Carolina.

It's all about building a deck that works, making your customers happy, and enjoying what you do. Those are the keys to success for Dean Collins, president of Collins Construction.

Collins began his building career as a carpenter at age 18. In the early 1980s, he was managing high-rise building construction in Washington, D.C. His father-in-law, Don Paice, vice president of a Trus-Joist® dealership in northern Virginia, asked him to start a deck building business for the company. "I

bought some books, did some research, found it was a great market, took right to it, and haven't gotten tired of it yet," Collins recalls. Two years later, Collins Construction, Inc. opened in Arlington, Virginia.

With 23 years of experience and more than 2,500 decks under his belt, Collins knows what works in deck layout and design. "We put a lot of thought into the design and planning," he points out. "It's going to not only be pleasing visually but also work for what they

want to do on the deck, whether that's entertaining, playing on an outdoor pool table, relaxing in the hot tub, or having a cooking area."

Collins Construction builds about 100 decks a year, ranging from a straightforward 400-square-foot residential deck to a \$35,000 custom deck on a home to a 10,000 square-foot deck at a condominium or hotel. The company's work is split evenly between residential and commercial projects. He enjoys the variety but stresses the need to stay



focused. "You can't let the big jobs ruin you. The average decks are your bread and butter, and you're going to be back to doing those so you have to enjoy building them," he says.

When Collins started the business, most of his decks were in new housing developments. He ran four to five crews, including one dedicated to high-end custom decks. In 1992, he moved the business to Florida to care for his father who had suffered a stroke. Today, Collins Construction runs two to three crews

professional deck builder

and builds decks on existing homes, most of which are waterfront on or near the Gulf of Mexico, so the company has added docks to its portfolio. They also do commercial work with condos and hotels. His wife, Dianna, works in business management while also serving as the company's bookkeeper. His son, Chris, worked for the business during the summers before leaving for college. Florida requires a "Class A" general contractor's license for work on any property that has a proposed or existing

building greater than three stories in height. By having this type of license, Collins Construction has the ability to work on any kind of project, including decks, docks, arbors, beach walkovers, band stands, and nature walks for hotels, condominiums, office buildings, and restaurants. "Most of our work on these projects now comes by way of reputation and referrals from architects and other general contractors," says Collins. He points out that his company was selected for a large project on the east coast of

Florida because a general contractor saw the Collins Construction Web site.

Although Collins says growth is not necessarily in the future for Collins Construction, he did see an opportunity for growth while building his mountain-top vacation home in Boone, North Carolina. "I couldn't resist because the market there is wide open," he says. "I'm keeping the Florida business at a steady level because that works for me." He credits the company's small size and focus on efficiency for the healthy profit margin on the half million dollars of business they do annually. The company generally doesn't work on projects that are less than 350 square feet or under \$4,000.

Collins had a vision for the future growth of composite decking materials when he became the first deck contractor in Florida to use Trex® decking in the early 1990s. "The introduction of composite decking sparked the explosion of the alternative deck building products market and the deck industry

is in a 'Golden Age' because of these products," he comments. Today, about 75 percent of the decks Collins Construction builds are composite.

His four-year apprenticeship with the carpenter's union gave him a solid base of knowledge. "It's important to build things plumb, level, and square and have a good plan. I wouldn't build a dog house without a plan. I'm a stickler for organized building, left to right, start to finish," he adds. "There's hardly ever a punch list at the end of our jobs because it all gets done while we work."

Collins believes it's important to hire experienced people. "Because a lot of talented carpenters have worked for me, we were able to develop what I call a space framing technique," he says. "We actually do the concrete footers and support posts after the frame is assembled. It saves at least a day in the framing process and reduces the chance for error in layout of the footers and posts in complicated deck shapes."

Even with his vision for successful

new products and innovative building techniques, Collins shuns today's computer-based deck design programs. "I still carry a portable drafting board to my estimates, and 95 percent of the time I design and draw the deck to scale, estimate it, and sell the job at the first meeting," he says. "Basically, I hate homework so I get it all done right there. We're not high pressure so if the customer isn't ready to commit, we tell them to call us when they are."

For Collins, it really is all about a deck that works, happy customers, and taking pride in his work. "It's exciting to watch several semi-truck loads of wood transform into a 10,000-square-foot marina in a couple of weeks," he says. "I thought I'd be over it by now, but every time we finish a deck I look at it with pride and imagine my happy customer enjoying it. 🏡"

About the Author

Anne W. West is a freelance writer based in Atlanta, Georgia.



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