

Book Review: 'Builder's Apprentice' a must-read for people looking to change things up

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By Lisa Allmendinger, Heritage Newspapers

Author Andy Hoffman custom built his career.

In "Builder's Apprentice," he takes readers through his decision to quit an engineering job, turn down acceptances to graduate school at Harvard and Berkeley, buy the best hammer and pick-up truck he could afford, and take a job as a carpenter.

I never thought I'd find the world of homebuilding and the real-life characters that inhabit it so fascinating.

But Hoffman makes a convincing case for both in his memoir published by Huron River Press.

He leads readers into the sawdust, bolts and the nails of building a high-end custom home -- one board, one electrical outlet, one concrete pour at a time.

"When I was 26, I fell in love," the forward begins.

"The object of my affection was not a woman, but a house, an extraordinary house that sits atop a gently sloping hill along a rural highway in southwestern Connecticut," it reads.

Hoffman had me at page one and held me captive through all 325 pages.

I loved this book, and the story of a five-year journey the author took more than 20 years ago.

He built several homes during this time, after which he penned a book that will inspire people to follow their personal passion regardless of its popularity with family and friends.

Perhaps one of the reasons I enjoyed Hoffman's decision to chuck it all and follow his dreams is because that's what I did.

And what I'm still doing 30 years later.

Hoffman described it as "completely immersing (him) self in a new culture and adopting its rules and beliefs as (his) own."

After helping a friend build a deck, he answered a newspaper ad for carpenters, left a job for which he had a college degree, and headed off to Nantucket and an hourly carpentry job for which he had zero qualifications.

Under the tutelage of builder Jack Schneider, Hoffman went from a desk job to a laborer's and then a supervisor's job, and loved almost every minute of it.

This book was crafted with as much loving care for the English language as the nuts and bolts of the homes that Hoffman helped to build.

"As I stood in the halls, I was alone and yet felt completely connected. The house was a part of me and I was a part of it," he wrote.

The intricacies of the building process are explained with such passion that I wanted to pick up a hammer and build something.

The message it offers to anyone who ever wanted to follow a dream is one worth heeding, even if it has nothing to do with carpentry.

This book is a beautifully written depiction of the personalities and intricate dance that takes place from the start of a home to its completion.

From the inner circle of players who make high-end custom homes come to life to the tenuous relationships between the workers, supervisors, engineers, architects and homeowners, this book offers readers a look into a world that few of us will experience.

This is a must-read book for anyone contemplating a career path, a change of career or building a home.

Currently, Hoffman is a University of Michigan professor.

"I build young minds with books and lectures where I once built homes with wood and nails," he writes.

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