

Norwood man pursues dream, details life as a carpenter in book

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Andy Hoffman sits in front of an 1870s Victorian house he gutted and renovated in 2003 in Boston. He is the author of “Builder’s Apprentice: A Memoir.”



NORWOOD - When Andy Hoffman graduated from Norwood High School in 1979, he had a good idea of what his career would look like.

And then something interesting happened along the way. Not long after embarking on a career in chemical engineering, he had a change of heart, left the field to become a carpenter and wrote a book on the experience.

This book is unlike the other seven books he has written, which focus on his current work in environmental, social, political and managerial issues.

In “Builder’s Apprentice: A Memoir,” Hoffman describes his experience building high-end and custom homes in Nantucket and Fairfield County, Conn.

“Builder’s Apprentice” is published by Huron River Press and hit the bookshelves in April. In it Hoffman speaks about his decision to leave the profession he went to school for and his life as a carpenter during that time.

“I took my first job and only then began to ask what I really wanted to do with my life,” he writes. “I helped a friend build a deck and felt a buzz that compelled me to look for carpentry jobs.”

And that is just what he did. In 1986 he took a chance and listened to his gut while keeping others’ expectations of him at bay. Not an easy thing to do, especially for a young person starting out.

“It took a tremendous amount of courage,” said high school friend, Kim (San Giacomo) White.

But Hoffman explains so clearly why he followed his passion and shares the entire process of his decision and the work at hand.

“My goal in writing this book was first, of course, to describe how uniquely high-end homes are built for select clients,” he penned. “But I also wrote this book as a coming-of-age story, and a celebration of the pursuit of creative impulses. I wanted to create a story that would inspire others to pursue their own dreams.”

Growing up in Norwood, Hoffman enjoyed his high school years. He played the trumpet and golf. He ran indoor track, cross-country and swam.

“I loved my high schools years. Many friends express surprise at that, but I really did,” he wrote in an e-mail. “I was a bandie, a jock, a brain and high school let me do all those things. I think that helped form me to be diverse in my interests and thinking.”

Another longtime friend Kim Smith, also a trumpet player in the high school band, recalls the times spent in band and classes with Hoffman.

“He was such a high-achieving scholar and I think that we all assumed he would take a straight path in the ‘typical’ route of academia and career choices,” she said.

It was his aptitude in math and science that got him thinking about a career in chemical engineering in the first place. He also thought a minor in environmental science would be a nice fit.

He graduated from UMass-Amherst in 1983 and went to work as a chemical engineer for the Environmental Protection Agency. However, in two years he began to feel unsettled.

“I fell back on what had been ingrained in me from my upbringing,” he wrote, “To grow and find new opportunities, the answer was a master’s degree: grades seventeen and eighteen.”

It wasn’t long before he had acceptance letters in hand from both Harvard and Berkeley, neither of which enticed him at the time.

Instead, he chose a path nobody would have predicted.

Some of his high school friends were not too surprised though, White among them.

“He is someone that can do anything; I thought it was pretty adventurous, the fact that he took a u-turn and took an unpaved path was not surprising at all,” she said. “I think he saw it as an adventure and if it didn’t work out, he would go back and look at his options.”

Smith recalls the day that Hoffman pulled up to her house on his motorcycle to tell her of his plan.

“I was both surprised and not surprised when Andy made the choice to become a carpenter,” she said. “But not so surprised, because Andy is a very reflective person – (he has) a philosophical sensibility coupled with a propensity for creativity and adventure ... he has a bit of Thoreau in him!”

And perhaps it was the later that propelled him to this new beginning.

The first couple of sentences in “Builder’s Apprentice” sum up Hoffman’s sentiment about his passion.

“When I was 26, I fell in love,” he writes on the first page. “The object of my affection was not a woman, but a house, an extraordinary house...”

His book speaks of his journey through shifting from white collar to blue collar work, from desk calculations to physical labor and from a job to a calling.

He compares the process to that of a monk, from entering the monastery and walking through the six-steps it takes to become one. The first step is as an aspirant, followed by discernment, postulate, novice, junior and then senior monk.

The six steps move from introduction to living the lifestyle, to leaving it to reflect upon and returning back to it if it is the right fit, training and progression through the last two levels.

“It was not my intention to walk through these stages when I entered the work of fine homebuilding and in the midst of the process I did not see the progression taking place. But after 20 years of distance, I see parallels between the commitment and conversion that I went through and that which a monk goes through,” Hoffman writes in his prologue.

“And in this process of transition, I adopted a new identity, becoming something different than what my life thus far had taught me to be, by completely immersing myself in a new culture and adopting its rules and beliefs as my own. It was a journey that has left an indelible mark on me; one that I will never forget because it is part of who I am now.”

When Huron River Press’s publisher Steve Klein first read “Builder’s Apprentice,” he could not put it down. Although it was a departure from Huron’s normal genres - cookbooks and regional books - he said he looked at it on three levels.

“First, it is about pursuing your dreams. So many young people today get stuck on a path and are not sure that it is really fulfilling their goals and they are afraid to make a change. Second, it is a story about building and a trade and how it comes together,” Klein said. “Third, it is so well written and compelling I could not put it down and that is why I love the book.”

Having pursued his dreams, today Hoffman is the Holcim (U.S.) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan. His title reflects the fact that the U.S. subsidiary of the Swiss cement conglomerate Holcim funds his chair at the university.

Hoffman has found a way to take his research and knowledge as a professor and bring it from academia to the business world.

Eventually, Hoffman did find himself in graduate school. In 1993 he graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a master's degree in civil and environmental engineering. In 1995 he earned a doctor of philosophy from the Alfred P. Sloan School of Management and the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

Today Hoffman not only teaches environmental and managerial classes, he also travels around the world as a guest lecturer and guest teacher. Besides the books he has authored, he has written over 90 professional articles and research reports. Hoffman currently has a number of publications in the works. He has also won numerous honors and awards for his work and sits on several advisory boards and councils in his field.

But once again, it is time for Hoffman to grow and find new opportunities.

He will be taking a sabbatical this upcoming school year. He might play golf, ride his Harley, cruise in his '52 Chevy pickup or kick back and enjoy reading or listening to music. But that won't be all that is on his plate.

"I am just trying to consider some new and innovative research topics," Hoffman said.

Then, too, there is the carpentry to consider.

"I strap on my tool belt that feels just as familiar as it ever did. No time seems to have passed ...," he writes on the last page of his book. "... The scream of the saw quickens my heart and the smell of sawdust filling the air returns me to days gone by. I am still a builder; and I am still in love."

And to think that Hoffman's journey started with lending a hand to help a friend build a deck.

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This is one of two “eyebrow” skylights in a house Andy Hoffman worked on.



The front deck of a home Andy Hoffman worked on.



Andy Hoffman is pictured in 1987 at age 26 when he supervised work on a house.



One of the homes Andy Hoffman worked on is being framed.