

“Allison is the total package. The business background she brings to the table is huge, and quite unique to the industry. Then Grainger provides the expertise on the building side ... They definitely exceeded our expectations — Trisha Mackay, Rockwood Custom Homes customer

# SUCCESS BUILT ON FINANCIAL METRICS

## ALLISON GRAFTON

Allison Grafton takes home-building very much to heart. The Top winning candidate in the WKN Canada's Most Powerful Women Top 100 Awards, she admits to being a serial renovator and builder, even during her early years of working as an investment banker. In 2009, 12 homes and 15 years later, she decided she had amassed enough personal experience to found Rockwood Custom Homes.

Despite the fact she started the business in a recession, in four short years the Calgary-based luxury home construction company went from \$1-million in annual revenue to \$22-million and garnered countless awards — ranging from design to construction to entrepreneurship — for Grafton and her business partner, Grainger Nimmo. Grafton is focused on growth while maintaining Rockwood's core integrity to provide the highest-quality product, the top customer service and highest level of management on every home they build and taking that strict vision into their own Rockwood Exclusive developments in Calgary/Elveden Height Estates and Mountain Pine Estates.

For Grafton, building a home is much more than a business proposition. It's about creating a stress-free experience for her clients while respecting their financial investment, their needs, and the needs of their families. Add some sound financial management and rock-solid project management, and she has managed to spawn a winning formula that is revolutionizing the home-building industry in the region.

She prides herself on the fact that Rockwood's approach and business model are unique to the industry. Customers such as Trisha Mackay would agree wholeheartedly. “Allison was the total package. The business background she brings to the table is huge, and quite unique to the industry. Then Grainger provides the expertise on the building side. Allison took a house we really liked and through the design process with Rockwood, all the pieces started to come together. They definitely exceeded our expectations in delivering a beautiful well-designed house that our family enjoys and appreciates every day.”

The combination worked well for Wanda Ophim, who hired Rockwood to build a new home. “The balance of the two really works. She has the energy and the business background.



Allison Grafton defied convention by founding Rockwood Custom Homes during a recession, and the company continues to flourish.

He has the building experience. And they treat their team very well. People enjoy working for Rockwood and it clearly shows.”

The proof was in the final product, she adds. “The house turned out beyond our expectations, when it was all pulled together. In fact at the reveal we were very overwhelmed and speechless. She had turned our thoughts and dreams into reality.”

Grafton believes her strength lies in her ability to achieve balance in all things relating to building a home — from financial planning and architectural design to project management and execution. “I'm a wife and a mother of three great kids, so I've always had to be really good at balance,” she says.

The financial metrics also play a critical role in Rockwood's success. Grafton applies her own stringent processes and metrics to every build. She starts each project with a detailed cost estimate and carefully values each component, down to the last spindle, moulding or fixture. The budget is updated each month and a variance analysis is conducted and shared with the clients. The process is so sound that in the years Rockwood has been in operation,

it has come in on budget 98% of the time on house construction projects. She's also a taskmaster on quality control. “I'm tough when it comes to making sure things get resolved to a customer's satisfaction,” she says.

The same rules apply to team members, she adds. “I'm very careful when hiring for a new position. I think long and search hard for the right person. It has to be someone who can be mentored in the Rockwood way. Our

work hard and expect others to do the same.”

Nimmo says he met Grafton 20 years earlier when he was building her uncle's house. When she called him four years ago to discuss starting Rockwood it only took him a few days to decide to join her.

He describes them as being “useful opposites” because of their contrasting skill sets. “She has a solid financial background and real flair for design. I have years of development and home construction experience. It seemed like something we would have a good chance at having some sort of success at, given our combined skills.”

Besides, the time was ripe for injecting change into an industry that, for the most part, had a terrible reputation, Nimmo says. “Most of that dissatisfaction came from timelines and budgets not being met, and poor communications and financial information.” Hence the Rockwood focus on excellent day-to-day communications and tight budget-control processes.

Dave Furze is a project manager who has been with Rockwood since its inception. Having worked with many interior designers, architects and builders, he says he sees a huge difference between Grafton's way of doing

things versus other builders. “No one does financials better than Rockwood. The package we give customers is second to none. The architectural design of our homes along with the interior design is exceptional, and combine this with the stringent financial management and you have the winning recipe of a truly great homebuilder. That's what Allison's vision was from day one”

The level of communications with clients is just as exceptional, Furze says. “We are literally in contact with a client every day, which is much more than a typical builder would do. Having that complete package makes them feel very safe. We don't just build. We protect them.”

For Furze, Rockwood's success boils down to important basics — integrity and respect. “Allison's definitely a force who has surrounded herself with amazing people. Everyone has a high level of respect for her. And with Grainger and Allison's combined skills, I don't think anyone else in the city has the balance Rockwood has.”

For Grafton, it's more profound than that. As she proudly states, “We are the next generation of home builders.”

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## Rockwood founder brings a fresh perspective to home-building

It has only been four short years since Allison Grafton approached her business partner, Grainger Nimmo, to create Rockwood Custom Homes. It was enough time, however, for Grafton to catapult to a position of leadership in the Calgary construction community. We met with Allison recently and asked her to share some of her perspectives on being a woman of influence in what has historically been an industry dominated by men.

**Q** What appealed to you about the home-building business?

**A** When I was an investment banker I managed 12 home builds and renovations during the course of 15 years. As I built more and more homes, it became clear that I had some natural talent for what was then still a hobby.

I loved taking on the challenge of creating our family homes and learned how critical organization, proper financial management, and stellar design were to a successful project — a lot of this was lacking in the industry. I also realized that there were few builders that took the job of custom construction seriously enough. I felt I could do better than what was then the standard and so, at the age of 40, I exited my career in finance and together with Grainger founded Rockwood Custom Homes.

**Q** What do you feel a woman can bring to the planning table?

**A** Unfortunately, there are a lot of short cuts [when it comes to home building] that still go on in the construction industry. While I can't speak for all of women, I know that

I truly care about not only about the building details but the desires and preferences of each and every homeowner. I believe that clients are at their most vulnerable when they're building or renovating a home, so they need to be protected in many different ways. As a wife and mother, I bring a different level of understanding about what a client will actually encounter during a home build. Combined with my own financial and construction experience, I feel I've got a bit of wisdom to impart. It's one thing to just build a beautiful home. It's another to build a beautifully designed and efficient home without the financial worry of blowing your budget all while creating a stress-free experience for my clients. And that's what I strive to do with every single build.

**Q** What about your people?

**A** Together with my great business partner, we have cultivated a truly amazing team. We seek out individuals that are driven, intelligent, compassionate and have the same



A Rockwood Custom Homes design.

big, lofty goals that we do. We then provide them with a flexible work environment and the right blend of autonomy and accountability to succeed. We have never had an employee leave.

**Q** Now that you've been doing this for a few years, what goes through your mind these days?

**A** I love being an entrepreneur. I love

seeing Rockwood grow and thrive. My kids are 18, 16 and 12, so I am still busy with my family life but also with my business. But I've always dreamed big and gone after big things. Rockwood has been an amazing opportunity for me and in the grand scheme of things, we're just getting started.

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