



This Ain't Your Granddaddy's Pole Shed

Go Green Without Going Broke with Barn-Livin'

By Micah Sargent

Sue Oliver has been a pioneer all her life. In the mid 80s she started working two jobs in the construction industry, a field dominated by men. In the 90s she started a grass-fed sheep and cattle operation, well ahead of the locavore movement, all the while raising a couple of kids on her own. With her current project, Barn-Livin' LLC, Sue blends an engineer's understanding of building with an artist's eye for detail and design to create green homes that folks can afford. She calls it building "green homes for blue collars" and, judging from the current workload, she'll be busy building affordable, green homes until she's ready to quit.

In 2005, Sue, now based in Chemung,

New York, was in the market for a new home. While exploring her options, she couldn't find anything that suited her needs and style, while staying within her budget. She thought, "You know, for twenty-some years, I've been designing homes. I've worked for architects, engineers, and I was a commercial project manager so I know construction and I know design." Sue (above with one of her homes) decided to come up with something all her own. The result was Barn-Livin' (www.barnlivin.com or 607-733-2458).

Barn-Livin' designs and builds barn-style homes that are based on a post frame construction. But make no mistake, this ain't your granddaddy's pole shed. Sue has

designed post frame structures that are currently used for commercial kitchens and dining halls, country clubs, and for a viewing pavilion at Watkins Glen International Raceway. Recently she has been focusing her efforts on designing and building homes that blue collar workers can afford without sacrificing quality or craftsmanship. Sue says that when you get a Barn-Livin' home "you're getting a hybrid of a structure that is very energy efficient and very cost effective."

Barn-Livin' homes start at around 100 dollars per square foot, which is comparable to manufactured homes and blows the cost of a typical barn home out of the water. The other benefit is that these homes are

extremely energy efficient, resulting in long-term savings over the life of the home. Barn-Livin' customers can sleep well at night knowing that their building materials came from within a 500-mile radius, cutting down on transportation fees and the environmental impact that moving large-scale items like building materials causes. Sue also uses local contractors and strives to pay them a wage that can support a family, helping to keep our local economies vibrant. All of Barn-Livin's homes are made with closed cell spray foam insulation that, in addition to supplying an exponentially higher R-value than traditional fiberglass, provides added structural strength. The post frame structure used on most Barn-Livin' homes causes less ground disturbance than traditional foundation types, resulting in less erosion and less fossil fuel consumption for site work. All of Barn-Livin's homes are Energy Star Certified.

But Barn-Livin' homes are not just energy and cost efficient, they are beautiful. Most of Sue's projects incorporate an open design featuring stamped concrete first floors, Amish-made cabinets, and tons of locally sourced hemlock. A typical Barn-Livin' home takes about nine or ten months from the beginning of the design process to completion of construction, but Sue urges customers to take their time making decisions on their homes since they will have to live with those decisions for a very long time. Design features of Barn-Livin' homes tend to change as Sue, the homeowners, and the builders start taking on the process of putting each individual dream home together. As Sue says, "We're taking a design on paper and we're developing it as [the home] is being built."

Sue earned her design and engineering experience while working for eighteen years with an engineering firm in Elmira, New York. As a single mom trying to pay for the extras that many folks take for granted, she took on a second job designing post and beam homes or, as she put it, "selling her sleep." While working with the engineering firm, she led a forensics and probable cause team that looked at insurance claims and the reasons why buildings failed. This combination of engineering know-how and design was the perfect training ground for starting a company like Barn-Livin'.

"Not only did I learn how to design and how to build frugally and how to take different components and meld them into something different," Sue says, "but I also learned how not to build, what details didn't work, and why they failed."

Aside from structural differences, Barn-Livin' homes differ in the way that the customer is billed. Instead of paying a general contractor who hires sub-contractors and marks up their rates accordingly, Barn-Livin' customers pay each contractor separately. Sue acts as the construction manager to make sure everything runs smoothly and is completed in a timely matter. This system allows the homeowner to have more control over the construction and design process while saving them thousands of dollars in construction costs.

There are a number of Barn Livin' projects going up in the area this construction season, including homes in Burdette and Newfield, New York, and in Mansfield and Troy, Pennsylvania. There's never been a better time for going green and helping to make our area more beautiful and energy efficient.

Micah Sargent is a builder, writer, musician, and outdoorsman. He lives in Wellsboro, PA with his wife and three children.

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