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## New generation hammers into home-building

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John Kirksey Jr. and Lee Zieben may have well-known last names in the local real estate industry, but the partners are looking to nail down a niche of their own with their home-building venture, Zieben Kirksey Homes.

Kirksey Jr. is the son of John Kirksey, president of successful Houston architecture firm Kirksey, while Zieben is the son of Herbert Zieben of Herbert Zieben Development Corp. Herbert Zieben was one of the leading home-builder's in Houston during the 1970s.

"We want to do our own thing," says Kirksey Jr. "Our fathers have made their marks, and now it's time for us to make our own marks." The entry point for making that stamp is Bellaire, where ZK Homes has begun work on its first community, Pine Ridge Villas at Bellaire. The 36-home gated community, located at 5530 Pine St., will contain patio homes ranging from 2,800 square feet to 3,300 square feet in size. They will be priced between \$400,000 and \$600,000.

Four homes are completed in Pine Ridge Villas, with another 11 under construction, according to Zieben, who estimates that it will take 18 months to build out the entire community. ZK Homes has sold a total of 12 homes in the community, which the company began by building only one home at a time.

The builders are working with Houston-based Sullivan Stevens & Henry Architects and Mackay Rosenberg Designers on their first neighborhood. Kirksey Jr.'s father's firm, Kirksey, is not serving as the architect because that firm focuses on commercial projects, rather than residential.

Meanwhile, Zieben says ZK Homes is



DAVID A. FARIAS/HBJ

**John Kirksey Jr., left, and Lee Zieben of Zieben Kirksey Homes: At home in the local real estate market.**

also finalizing plans for a 186-home gated community inside the 610 Loop and is considering other larger opportunities within master-planned communities.

With an initial focus on high-end homes, ZK Homes is employing a top-down approach to Houston's home-building market.

"We're not just going to build one home here and one home there," Zieben says. "If we're going to build a community, we're going to go in and be pioneers in the area and bring in the higher-end homes without having to first bring in lower-end homes and grow from there."

In the next 12 months, ZK Homes has plans to build as many as 180 homes in two to three new communities in the inner Loop area, according to Zieben. He estimates that in the next four years the com-

pany will be building at least 400 homes a year.

With a business plan chock full of Mediterranean- and Spanish-style patio homes, ZK Homes is targeting empty-nesters and young professionals looking to move up from a starter home.

To be sure, the company has a firm understanding of a big part of its target market.

Zieben and Kirksey, both 30, are the eldest employees of the five-person company.

Kirksey says the company is able to capitalize on its youth by being creative and building modern homes that the employees themselves would want to live in.

### FATHER KNOWS BEST

Zieben and Kirksey say their fathers al-

## ZK HOMES: Sons shining in real estate by venturing into their fathers' footsteps

lowed them to learn from their own mistakes, but have also cautioned them on certain business decisions.

The partners admit that they are learning the business the hard way — by working 80- to 90-hour weeks, staying in constant contact with architects and engineers, and wearing shorts and tennis shoes into the field each day to make sure every home meets their standards.

While neither of the partners have any home-building experience, both are relying on their business backgrounds to get ZK Homes off the ground.

Kirksey most recently managed and marketed an interior construction company. He had also previously served as a managing director for a private real estate investment trust, along with his father.

Zieben, meanwhile, ran a Houston-based software company, experience which has come in handy for streamlining the purchasing and estimating procedures at ZK Homes. For example, the company's superintendents carry PDAs in the field as they're preparing the homes for inspection.

Zieben started a home-building company in July 2004 called Zieben homes, but later restructured and renamed the company when Kirksey joined as a partner.

Based on their past experiences, Kirksey manages the engineering, design and construction, while Zieben handles the fi-

nance, sales and marketing aspects.

"We're packaging ourselves as a large company so that we can grow into it," Kirksey says.

ZK Homes has leased some office space downtown, but the firm is still operating from an on-site trailer at Pine Ridge Villas. The decision to stay on-site was made in an effort to teach the employees every aspect of the building industry, according to Kirksey.

John Kirksey Sr. says the partners' deep roots in the Houston area should give them a leg up on entering the competitive Houston market.

"They have both grown up around this industry, and they've both discovered they have natural talents in the home-building industry," Kirksey Sr. says.

Indeed, Zieben says that because of their backgrounds, he and Kirksey Jr. are familiar with prime areas for building and are keenly aware of what their competition is doing.

"We're here to stay," he says. "Our goal is to build a strong name that will be one to reckon with within the next five years." Indeed, David Weekley, chairman of Houston-based David Weekley Homes, says he has heard positive things about the newcomers competing against incumbent builders in the local industry. He says the success of ZK Homes will depend on



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**John Kirksey Jr.**  
ZK Homes

their approach to building homes and the type of products they introduce into specific markets.

"I know that John comes from great DNA in terms of design," he says. "I have every belief that they can be successful in this market."



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