

Before buying Shelter-Kit five years ago, President David Kimball worked in the toy, gas, and gardening industries.

A manual for a typical Shelter-Kit home contains more than 60 pages and roughly 30 illustrations.

A Shelter-Kit home comes with more than 5,000 individual pieces including plywood, lumber, roofing and hardware.

CHRISTINE CAPOMANO

Shelter-Kit Builds on Success

BY ERIKA COHEN

Editor's Note: This department profiles successful NH entrepreneurs and their businesses each month.

It's the ultimate erector set for adults. For 40 years, Shelter-Kit has designed affordable, build-it-yourself homes, barns, cabins and garages that combine sweat equity, simple instructions and quality materials. And the kits don't require cranes or power tools to assemble (www.shelter-kit.com).

The Tilton company sells about 30 kits a year, and their current fiscal year is the best year of the last five, according to President David Kimball. The average building is 1,200 to 1,500 square feet and is most often used as a second home or barn. Home kits are designed for those with no prior building experience and include building manuals and 3-D renderings created by Leonard Faria, the company's vice president. (To the right in picture.) The company has two full-time employees and five part-timers. Shelter-Kit has been featured in *Vermont Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *Family Circle*, *Country Living* and *Yankee Magazine*.

BNH: Why do people buy a Shelter-Kit building?

Leonard Faria: "A lot of folks just have an urge to build their own house, but not everyone has the time or the skills or the tools, so we fill in these gaps by providing a design they can finish." Home kits include everything needed to build a weather-tight shell, including the frame, siding, sheathing, hardware, roofing and subfloors. Parts are pre-cut and labeled.

Q: What does it cost?

David Kimball: Prices vary from about \$20,000 for a 1,200-square-foot barn or house to more than \$50,000 for larger homes or barns. "You're going to spend at least as much as the kit to finish the house." About three-quarters of buyers do all or most of the work themselves, which takes about 10 days for two people. "I think there is a history of people turning to us because they can save money with a little bit of sweat equity."

Q: Who are your customers?

Kimball: "We ship them all over the place: the Midwest, West Coast, Japan, Spain. We

do a lot of small buildings," he says, adding that the most popular kit is a 12-by-12-foot cabin, called a Unit 1. "People will put two to four of them together." One Shelter-Kit cabin, built by Faria, is used as a pump house on Wildcat Mountain in Jackson.

Q: How have the homes changed over the years?

Kimball: "Last year, we introduced a Green Home Kit that uses natural materials from local sources whenever possible." That means using sheathing products without formaldehyde, not using old-growth wood and adding many energy efficient features. "If someone wants a green home, we can supply most of the materials [wood sources from NH and Maine] within 500 miles."

Q: What are your goals for the coming year?

Kimball: "I want more people buying kits for starter homes. I'd love to see that because I think people with a little sweat equity could build their first home just the way they want it. My goal is to grow the business 15 percent this year." ■