



Photography by Peter Neff



# THE WINNING TEAM OF SUNCREST HOMES

**P**ittsburgh and the surrounding region boast a long tradition of superior sports teams, most notably the Steelers, Pirates and Penguins, earning the region’s ultimate title – City of Champions. But there’s another “team” in the area whose nearly 30-year tradition of building quality homes has captured not only industry recognition but the hearts of innumerable folks across Allegheny, Butler, and Westmoreland Counties – the winning team of Suncrest Homes. Coached by founder J. Michael Ruefle, President, Suncrest Homes is a family owned and

operated endeavor quarterbacked by daughter Colleen Ruefle-Haley, Vice President, along with the help of an experienced, long-time huddle of craftsmen, designers and vendors. Champions in their own right, the Suncrest Homes team has racked up multiple awards – six in six years – and that’s one for a second thumb for those keeping score including the 2014 Best 50+ Single Family Detached Home over \$250,000 and the 2014 Best Outdoor Living Project – New Home from the Builders Association of Metropolitan Pittsburgh (BAMP) with past accolades from the Housetrend

inspired home and garden blog for Housing Excellence, among others. Today, Suncrest Homes continues its winning ways with luxury custom and semi-custom homes most recently in Murrysville and Penn Township, Westmoreland County. “As a custom builder, we build homes in a multitude of styles and locations,” said Ruefle-Haley. “And we partner with various developers for optimal land development.” The current Murrysville projects offer a range of single family home styles including Serenity Pointe with its recreational facilities and special home plans that can be

customized, starting at \$599,000; Siena Ridge with 74 high end luxury homes starting at \$700,000 nestled in a secluded setting; Mallard Landing, high end luxury executive home sites starting at \$550,000 on two cul-de-sac streets; and Foxtail Court, with 16 level estate home sites situated on three-quarter to one acre lots starting at \$700,000. All of these developments are close to major roadways, shopping, restaurants, and churches in the highly regarded Franklin Regional School District with easy access to Pittsburgh via U.S. Route 22 and the Parkway, and within driving distance of the Laurel Highlands for those interested in seasonal sports. Beyond the Murrysville developments, Suncrest Homes can range from the \$200,000 mark upward to \$2 million with square footage starting at 1,500 square feet to the extent of one's imagination. Other builds, such as Allegheny Woodlands just north of Apollo, are designed to meet the varied needs of young families, singles and empty nesters alike with single family homes starting at \$290,000 and cottage villas in the low \$200,000s along with amenities such as a clubhouse, Bocci court and playground. Of significance is that none of the Suncrest communities are age restrictive. "Many of our clients don't want a single-age living environment," she continued. "They want age diversity."

**More Than Just a Business**

For J. Michael Ruefle and Colleen Ruefle-Haley, Suncrest Homes isn't just their occupation. It's more of a vocation, with Ruefle starting out as a framer and apprentice carpenter in the 1960s. "My father and his brother started a remodeling business," said Ruefle-Haley. "But he always had the desire to build single family homes." Now equipped with hands-on experience, a business degree from Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh, and an intimate involvement in the development aspect of building, he struck out on his own and formed Suncrest Homes in 1987. "Our family is actually from Plum, but when my

dad started the business, he built his first model home in Murrysville," she said. "He developed his base [of operation] here that evolved into other geographic areas." At age 13, rookie Ruefle-Haley helped at her father's office, often visiting construction sites with him. This impressionable young lady grew to learn the business, helping with bookkeeping and more. While in college, she continued in the "training camp" of construction by working evenings and weekends and, despite a short career in advertising, joined Suncrest Homes. "He truly needed a full-time employee," she mused. "I never thought I would do this for a living."

What is most evident at Suncrest Homes is their dedication to quality and the team concept. A common thread that runs through their day-to-day work is that clients are served most advantageously when they work together with the builder, the architect/designer, and their craftsmen. In fact, Ruefle-Haley believes the team approach sustained them through the construction downturn in 2008. But you don't have

to look far to see evidence of their commitment to teamwork. According to Darlene Hunter, Vice President and Regional New Homes Manager, Howard Hanna Real Estate Services, Suncrest Homes is one of her



premiere builders, one who survived the housing downturn and has progressed. It's not very difficult to sell these (Suncrest) homes," she said. "They exemplify a true team concept and, in the end, they give you one great home in which the whole team has contributed." She continued that most people find a great deal

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of attention is paid to detail and the originality of the interior and exterior designs. "There's great overall care and concern when they (Suncrest) meet with the client," she added. "They review the whole construction process, explaining what will occur. They go through a lot of stages and are very good at preparing the buyer." And whether or not the client is building a small patio home or a million dollar estate home, Suncrest "provides the same level of service to all clients." Suncrest works with designers and architects and in their semi-custom communities, they offer a number of base models that may incorporate lofts, screened enclosures and more. Here, the client can opt for further customization. Or others, complete customization may be the ticket. Ruefle-Haley noted, however, that many customers want to "see what

we can do," which explains their ample quantity of model homes. "If you come to see us to build a home, you meet with our team," she said. "Our designer can help the client make exterior and/or interior choices ... colors, countertops, finishes, for example." Additionally, the client meets with the

the client's taste. They have also done crown molding that's award winning." Other custom features may include higher end custom columns, shutters or gable work, depending on the style of the home. Naturally, Suncrest works with outside vendors who feel as passionate about quality home

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building as the internal team. One such vendor is Paulette Betts, Sales Representative, Crescent Supply, a plumbing wholesaler in Lawrenceville. Having a 29-year association with Suncrest, Betts often participates in the team process, visiting the office weekly to discuss client needs and the various stages of construction in those client's home

carpenter, electricians, plumbers and others, often getting to know one another by name. "Our team is very hands-on," she continued. "Our master carpenter may do custom beam work, built-ins, casing work or railings to suit

builds. "We review a customer's 'wish list', then a package is presented based on the customer's wants with products they feel comfortable with in quality and design," Betts explained. The customer then has



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the opportunity to meet with the Crescent designer to review the package and/or to discuss changes. "It's a back and forth process until the customer is completely satisfied," she added. "Our goal is to make people feel comfortable with the price they are paying and the product they are getting." As a former fixture product representative, she believes that Suncrest utilizes quality products such as Kohler, Watermark and others in all their homes. "Even if you change nothing (from a base package), it's a very good product. From a quality standpoint, you can't go wrong."

Chris Cluss, a third generation leader of the O.C. Cluss Lumber Company, feels a kinship with a local family owned business such as Suncrest. "We like local, successful businesses in our industry," Cluss noted. "Suncrest is the perfect customer. They're progressive, produce a top quality

product, and are comprised of good people. You know who you're dealing with at any given time." As a supplier for lumber, doors and windows, Cluss also embraces the team feeling found there. "Our salesmen on the account communicate with them weekly. I meet with them at least quarterly to review new products on the market." Walking through blueprints and aiding in customizing building packages, Cluss knows firsthand that they are "on the cutting edge" of what's happening in the industry. "Colleen and the people at Suncrest spend countless hours going over every detail and the customization is done very well. And, Michael has an eye for architecture." O.C. Cluss provides national brands such as Owens Corning insulation, Anderson and Silver Line Windows, Thermo-Tru doors, interior trim packages and Hardie siding, a cement-based siding that is more effective, more stable

than vinyl siding and aesthetically pleasing. "In their homes, we also use the latest in fiberglass doors with a high "R" value (for insulation) and performance standard." Hunter also observes that the homes feature moldings and doors that are unique, "which sets them apart from other builders." She is quick to add that Suncrest truly has an eye for outdoor spaces, too, where the stonework and designs "are very original whether it's a gazebo, outdoor kitchen or outdoor fireplace," she said. "The exteriors have a certain flair so that you can often tell it's a Suncrest home." Always seeking to stay ahead of the housing trend curve, Suncrest Homes began incorporating the Craftsman style home into their bull pen of plans some 10 years ago, as one of the first builders to do so. Ruefle-Haley cited other trends clients want and are provided in the customization process including walk-in showers,

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some with two seats and two shower heads, and eight-foot shower stalls, among other items. Betts, too, noted that today's buyers are considering alternatives such as an "air" tub rather than a whirlpool tub, a cleaner option that drains better and offers a less vigorous massage, an additional hand-held shower head in the master bath, comfort height commodes, and, on the horizon, a return to brass fixtures but with a slightly different finish, among others. While perhaps not a "trend", Ruefle-Haley has noticed that more young families, as well as singles and empty-nesters, show a preference for a ranch style home where all living is on one floor or perhaps a story and a half home. "We do see more calls on these than we do two-story homes."

For some, a new home build may not be in the game plan. And, while not an overtly advertised service, home remodeling is also within the purview

of Suncrest Homes. "Any number of folks are calling and coming back to us for a room addition or an outdoor living space," Ruefle-Haley noted. "Some have built with us and don't want to leave their home or neighborhood, but just want to expand their footprint." For some higher end homes built in the 1980s and 1990s, Suncrest's team has gutted kitchens, dining rooms and/or opened up a home to give it the open floor plan so valued today. "Some of our carpenters have worked with my father in the remodeling business so we've expanded that aspect of the company," she added. In some instances, Suncrest has done three-story additions.

And there's no doubt Colleen Ruefle-Haley is part of the "big leagues" in the home construction business. In fact, she is only the second woman in 75 years to be President of the

Builders Association of Metropolitan Pittsburgh (BAMP) and has served as the 2015 secretary for BAMP. Early on she had won the Westmoreland Home Builders Association "Builder of the Year" award in 1993, an honor previously won by her father. In 1996, she was elected the first woman President of the Westmoreland Home Builders Association. Ultimately, this father-daughter team have worked to build a reputation for quality that has garnered respect and contributed to the overall building community. Quite a home run for this duo whose desire is to fulfill each client's dream of the ultimate home that, as Darlene Hunter sees it, "definitely appreciates and follows the market in holding their value." **NH**



Colleen Ruefle-Haley, Vice President of Suncrest Homes; Photography by Jan Pakler