

## Society

City Year Chicago honors Deborah DeHaas and the White Sox.  
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# THE BUSINESS OF LIFE

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## Info Junkie



Sportvision CEO Hank Adams follows technology—and history, too. PAGE 26

## SEEN &amp; NOTED

## When granite's out of style, they'll be ready

Granite counters and floors of 2¼-inch oak planks have ruled housing style for years. But high-end home buyers are starting to branch out.

At Mr. Floor Cos. in Skokie, co-owner Igor Murokh has noticed rising demand for wood planks as wide as 10 inches. "You need wider planks for floors in the big great rooms that people are putting in their houses today," he says.

A decade ago, 90% of Mr. Murokh's sales were in oak and other materials native to the United States. Now more than half his business involves imported woods. Jatoba from Brazil, prized for its natural mahogany colors, is newly popular. So is bamboo in minutely woven strands.

"Clients who are environmentally conscious like bamboo for its green qualities," Mr. Murokh says. "Bamboo is harvested after just seven to nine years of growth, while an oak tree can take 40 years or more."

Stephen Knutson, an Evanston architect and interior restorer, works with soapstone for countertops and German silver for sinks and countertops, at five times the price of stainless steel.

"My clients want the unusual," he says. "They want what their neighbors don't have."

Sally McQueen, 37, who is remodeling her family's kitchen in Wilmette, opted for a counter top of marble, which is susceptible to stains. But Ms. McQueen decided on a sturdy sealant to protect it after also considering limestone, tinted concrete and reclaimed hardwoods.

"Kitchens are all designed around trends, and for a while now granite has been the trend," she says. "But I think it will look dated in a few years when people move on to something else. Marble, to me, is classic and timeless."

H. Lee Murphy

## RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE



Noelle Walsh and her husband, Daniel, had to find a new builder for their Glenview home after the first ran into financial troubles. But they were determined to complete the \$3.3-million house.

ISA PERINI

## High-end hope

Some see glimmers of activity, even amid glut of \$1M houses; 'coming out of this dark period'

BY H. LEE MURPHY

Look past the bankruptcies, foreclosures and empty subdivisions around Chicago and you'll see a faint stirring of activity in high-end home sales. Buyers are returning to open houses, in some cases to tour homes that were custom built for buyers who ultimately backed out of their deals. Others are back in the market for their own custom homes: Builders are fielding more phone calls and even laying plans for some speculative proj-

ects here and there.

It's too early to predict a bonafide recovery in the high-end market. There is still a big inventory of unsold houses priced above \$1 million to work through. But luxury homebuilders believe the worst of the severe downturn is over. Many expect to be hunting for empty lots where they can sink new foundations in coming months.

"Houses around here have started selling again. We're coming out of this dark period we've been in," says Patrick Richter, 58, owner of Richter

Builders LLC in Libertyville. He founded the firm in 1978—by his calculation, five recessions ago. At one time in the 1990s, Mr. Richter was building in a dozen local subdivisions simultaneously. A year ago, he didn't have a single new client in sight.

"The phone had stopped ringing," he says.

Now he has nine active clients and is so encouraged that he's breaking ground before summer on his first spec house—with no contract buyer—in nearly three years. It will be spread over 4,400 square feet and carry a price of nearly \$1.5 million. "By the time it's

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