

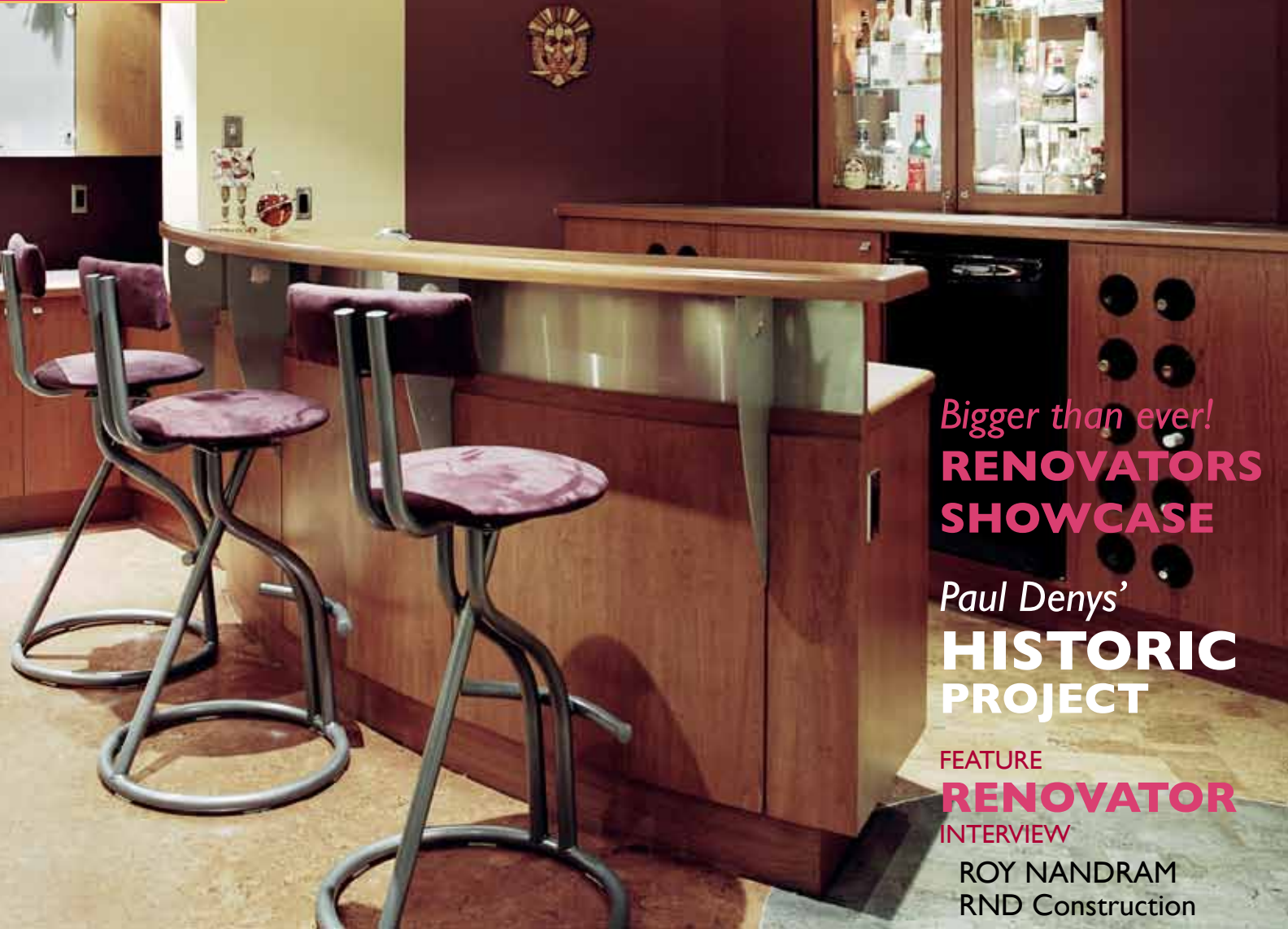
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INTERVIEW

ROY NANDRAM  
RND Construction

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# Starting with lemons and trees

## Behind the scenes of Roy's success

By Francie Healy

From birdcages to million-dollar renovations: Roy Nandram seems to have done it all.

A quiet man with a serene, ageless face, you might think at first he's solemn, even reserved. And, in a way he is. But little by little he opens up: the twinkle appears in his eyes, and you realize

you are talking to a man with humour, warmth, and wisdom.

You also realize this is no ordinary fellow. One of 10 children, he left his homeland by himself when he was just a teenager and settled in Ottawa, where he studied at Algonquin College. But even before that, before he left home, he had spent an

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Roy Nandram's renovations and constructions are usually large and, of course, impressive. Rarely does his company (RND Construction) take on anything small. His projects appear primarily in the attractive, often sought-after Ottawa neighbourhoods of Alta Vista, Rockcliffe, Old Ottawa South, Westboro, Confederation Heights, Tanglewood and Rothwell Heights.





Roy Nandram is passionate about the environment. As much as possible, and in everything he does (particularly in renovations of older homes), energy efficiency takes first priority. Right away, however, he reminds clients that just the act of renovation usually means they're "greening" their home.

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entire summer as a construction helper in the building of a house from start to finish. He had taken technical drawing in high school, and he did the drawings for that house, which became (and still is) the home of his sister and her husband. He was only about 16 years old.

"I learned a lot," he says.

When he returns to his native Guyana for a visit, that's where he stays, in that house he knows so well.

Although he had always loved building – from the time he built birdcages as a child in Guyana to that summer of house building – he didn't realize the part it would play in his life until much later. He certainly didn't think he'd own Ottawa's RND Construction and be at the very top of the building and renovating professions.

In fact, he first thought his calling was in

mechanical engineering. That made sense, because he had spent every summer in car shops when he was a kid, and anything mechanical was second nature. His uncles gave him work in their garages. He picked up technical stuff. He practically breathed it in.

But when he finished mechanical engineering, it dawned on him that it wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to work with people. So he enrolled in Industrial Engineering Technology and finished in a year.

"It was more about people and processes at work," he explains, "about the integration of these two, and I think this is still my best skill."

Despite his interest in Industrial Engineering, he wanted more. So he went to the University of Ottawa part time and got his degree in Economics. As if that wasn't enough, he

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Great renovations and buildings happen when the contractor knows the business inside out. Roy Nandram's projects started when he was a kid of 16. Through many years of training, experience, expertise and sharp business insight, his business is among the top three or four in Ottawa.



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took all kinds of construction-related courses and became a certified construction estimator.

You don't make the journey from birdcages and car shops in Guyana to Rockcliffe Park renovations without obstacles, challenges, and acres of life experience. Roy takes it all in stride, but you can tell he is rich in knowledge, intelligence, professionalism, pride and everyday smarts that allow him to be one of the three or four top renovators in Ottawa.

He remembers two important mentors in his life: a former employer, and his own father. The employer reminded him that he would always face lemons in life, but it was up to him to make the lemonade.

His father told him life is like a tree. You can stand at the bottom or you can climb a branch. You don't know where it will take you or how many other branches there will be. At the end of some branches there may be fruit – but you are not sure until you get there. So you have to make a decision and go with it.

Roy followed both pieces of advice, probably more than once. But one time in particular led him almost directly to his success today.

It started with two "lemons". He was a  
continued on next page

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rising star in a construction company, from estimator to co-ordinator of trades, labour and material, to project management. Alas, the company that hired him succumbed to the recession of the 1980s and had to close its doors. That was lemon No. 1.

A mortgage company hired him as a salaried employee a month later. Right away it had a big project that was in trouble. They needed someone to help finish it so they could sell it. It was a terrific challenge, and Roy was excited about it.

On the very next day, the boss told Roy he had to let him go. Turned out it was company policy to hire a third party company to resurrect troubled or bankrupt projects and not use one of their own employees. It seemed to be over for Roy – Lemon No. 2.

But what, he asked, if he was a company?

By the end of that very day Roy Nandram was a registered company with one employee: himself. It was RND Construction's first day in business. And his business finished the project for the mortgage company.

He had taken the risk of climbing a branch and he made lemonade all at once.

"Some things happen," he says, "over which you think you have no control. It boggles the mind."

And yet, Roy knew how to take control. Lemonade and trees. Simple.

"Little things," he adds, "can change your life."

He hopes his son, Andrew, will learn the same kind of lessons. But he's not sure. It's a different time, a different generation. Andrew is the product of a privileged Canadian upbringing, with different issues, struggles, and awareness.

Andrew is studying engineering (with an emphasis on environmental studies) at Queen's University in Kingston. Following in his father's footsteps? Not really, says Roy. Andrew is his own man. Roy says this with obvious pride.

Roy is married to Diane, and they live in the Ottawa area. Roy says Diane has been instrumental in the success of the company from day one. She looks after the accounting functions and all the office administration so Roy can focus on project management, marketing, client relations and committee work related to the business.

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What  
shade of  
**green**  
are you?

**EVERYBODY'S "GREEN", SAYS ROY NANDRAM,  
PRESIDENT OF RND CONSTRUCTION  
AND A DEVOTED "GREEN" RENOVATOR.**

Every time you recycle, every time you renovate, you're greening your home, he explains. Just using insulation is "green".

Green home renovation, he continues, is simply about improvements to your home that reduce or eliminate negative impacts on air, land or water.

"Our damage to the environment is similar to our gradual loss of vision," he says. "When we need glasses, we don't know it on the very first day. It's gradual. You think everything is normal."

He says we tend not to see the impact of the gradual deterioration of the earth.

"We're all in denial," he says. "We don't think it's happening." And certainly we don't see the immediate effect – until it's too late.

The bottom line, however, is what shade of green you are. To what extreme do you go, now and in the future?

At RND Construction, they try to go as "deep a shade of green" as they can. Most renovations will start out without specific "green" requests from clients, he says. "But incrementally, we turn it into a green project."

They have encouraged all renovation clients to participate in Ontario's Eco-Renewal rebate program while it lasts.

It's not difficult when clients realize the long-term, actual savings in energy through the choice of a new furnace or new windows or ecologically-friendly products.

"We educate as we go," says Roy. "We explain the cost/benefit."  
Most people end up making "green" choices.

**"EVERYONE CARES," HE SAYS. "THEY JUST DON'T ALWAYS KNOW IT."**

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Roy is both builder and renovator, primarily in the neighbourhoods of Alta Vista, Rockcliffe, Old Ottawa South, Westboro, Confederation Heights, Tanglewood and Rothwell Heights. His projects are large; he is selective. Rarely does he take on anything small.

He is passionate about the environment, and everything he does, particularly in renovations of older homes, has energy efficiency as a priority. He sees himself as an educator as well as renovator, because that's the best time to help people make decisions that affect the environment.

For instance, if a client is considering a new furnace, Roy will explain all the best options for saving money and energy over its lifetime. Windows are another golden opportunity for significant environmental changes. So is insulation.

Roy has been "green" before anyone thought of the term. He learned how to re-use and recycle when he was growing up in such a large family. In 1982 he received a certificate from the Canadian General Standards Board for insulating homes for energy conservation. Now he travels to green building conferences and seminars, uses reclaimed and recycled materials whenever he can, recycles demolition debris, and donates regularly to Habitat for Humanity. In 2009 he became a certified LEED® (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Accredited Professional, which meant he became an official "Green" builder/renovator under the Canada Green Building Council.

His clients seem to appreciate this kind of commitment to environmental stewardship. He has a stack of reference letters from people who say they like his "initiative", "environmental education", and "attention to detail". They also like the overall treatment they get. Words like "fantastic," "courteous", "considerate", "understanding" shine out from the accolades of happy customers.

And it's the clients who matter. "I love the work in progress as much as that final transformation," he says. "I can see the feelings, the emotions, of people as the work continues."

He might have the learning, experience, and brains to make spectacular renovations. But it really just comes down to one thing.

"I love making customers happy," he says. ○



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