

To See Ourselves as Others See Us

By George Porter

There is an old saying that states it is a very informative thing to see ourselves through other people's eyes. Our perception of ourselves may be tainted because we want to think we are doing a good job or have good reasons for our decisions. We like to think that we are performing a service and giving the world a good image of ourselves. We don't like to think of ourselves as involved in some sort of degrading profession that takes advantage of our fellow man. With extremely few exceptions this industry treats its customers well and provides a service that is desperately needed in this country. Housing is one of the basic needs of people and we provide more of it to the people that need it the most than any other entity, with no government subsidies involved. We provide equity, independence, and a good place to live. We have nothing to be ashamed of and every reason to be proud of what we do.

The reason I am beginning this article this way is because I had a strange experience last week that I think needs sharing. Sometimes, there is a problem with a home somewhere and the problem gets into a legal squabble between the dealer, the manufacturer, and the owner. At this point they occasionally call me to come look over the home and sort out who did what to whom. Nine times out of ten the case is settled out of court but there are always lawyers involved at this stage and it is necessary to deal with them.

On this particular job we were all traveling in a car to a rural area where the home in question which was located. During the ride the lawyer was constantly referring to this brand new 16 x 80 as "the trailer". Rather than deal with the issue of terms I said nothing to the lawyer because we had to get along. My clients were also his clients and I felt a little uncomfortable trying to correct this fellow if it was apparently OK with the person who hired us both to do this job.

When we got there the home was located on a hillside with at least a 20 degree slope to it. It was raining and the water was literally flowing down the hill, under the home, and out the other side. The home owner had made a little notch in the hill just big enough for the wheels and the dealer had put it in there. The whole area was a mud pie and one side of the home was several inches lower than the other. To tell the truth the I was a little concerned to be under it. It had no footings other than two four inch solids under the stacks and they were sitting in very, very soft ground. Not at all what the setup manual had in mind. No wonder the home owner had doors sticking, walls cracking, cabinets loose and a long list of other things that I am sure will grow larger each day. What a mess.

On the way home the lawyer was designing a strategy to use as a defense and was referring to the home as the "trailer" this and the "trailer" that. I couldn't stand it anymore so I said that if he didn't mind me sticking my nose in where it probably didn't belong I would like to offer him some advice. He said sure so I proceed to tell him that our client, a very large and old manufacturer of housing might prefer to have its product referred to as a manufactured home instead of "a trailer". He explained quickly to me that he knew exactly what he was doing and why. He had lived in the area

all his life and he knew the folks around here. He said no one who would be on a local jury would have any idea what in the world a “manufactured house” was. He wanted to be sure that they knew it was “a trailer” so they would not hold his client to a very high standard. He said when people know it is “a trailer” they just naturally don’t expect much and maybe they will go easier on our client. If they thought it was some sort of house they would think it was supposed to be level and straight like a “real home” is supposed to be. This lawyer was a very prominent member of this community and this is how he sees us. He will probably win the case because it is only “a trailer” and you can’t expect much. I could have talked to him about this for days and he would only have looked back at me like I was one of those folks who are not smart enough to know any better. After all we have done it is sort of sickening isn’t it?

What are we going to do with people like this? He showed me what he sees when he looks at our industry through his eyes. Sadly, I can’t convince him he needs glasses because what he sees is not us. When I get the answer to this one I probably won’t be crawling in the mud under houses and writing articles about it.