

# A Recipe for Success

## Meet Dan & Sheila Breeding



*Sheila & Dan were honored in 2008 with the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Distinguished Citizen Award by the Santa Clara County Council, Boy Scouts of America.*

by Sharleen Nelson

Whoever said mixing business with pleasure is a recipe for disaster never met Dan and Sheila Breeding. Married for nearly 50 years, business partners for 25, the Breedings have achieved that rare balance between work and matrimony. Preparing to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary next year, it's apparent that Dan and Sheila more than merely complement one another, they genuinely like each other. Indeed, the first thing you notice about them is that they seem to breathe as one, even to the extent that one finishes the sentence of the other. "We don't do much apart from each other," said Sheila. "We're a team!" added Dan. "Whatever she's involved in, I'm involved in, too." "If I dive in first, he comes in right behind me," Sheila finished.

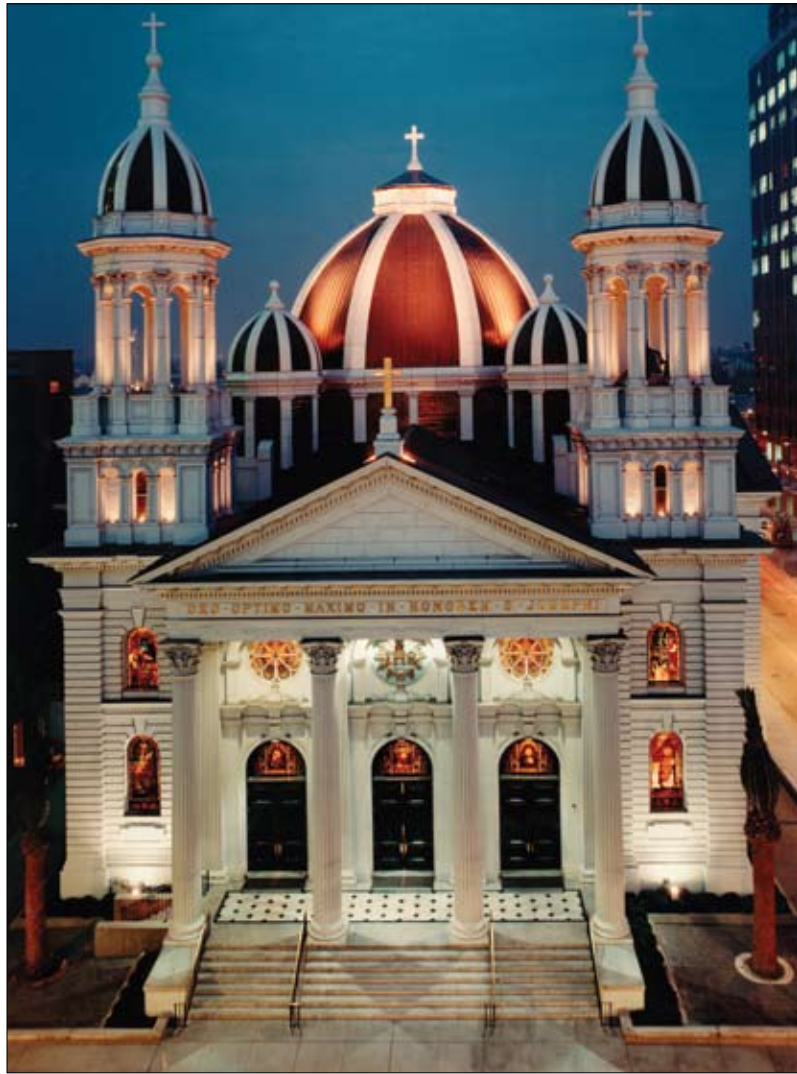
The Breeding's life narrative reads like the film, "It's a Wonderful Life." The couple met and married right out of high school, and then both

ended up working at Carl N. Swenson Construction Company—Sheila as a file clerk and Dan as a laborer. With tenacity and a good measure of sweat equity, Dan's meteoric rise in the company elevated him from laborer to supervisor to manager. It was here that Dan and Sheila met their future business partner, Chuck Toeniskoetter, with whom they formed the idea of starting their own construction and property development business. Scraping together their combined savings, they co-founded Toeniskoetter & Breeding Inc. in 1983.

Like the Breeding's commitment to each other, their relationship with Toeniskoetter was equally unassailable. "From what I've observed, partnerships usually don't work," Dan said. "We were one of the exceptions." And according to Dan, building a reputation based on integrity, first-class service, and accessibility were key elements to



*The Breedings rented their first motorhome in the early 1970s so they could go camping and fishing with friends.*



*The Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph, located in downtown San Jose, is the Breeding's legacy to the city.*

their success as a company. "We combined the strength of both our reputations into one company," he said. "Our philosophy was that that was why we put our name on the company." Additionally, a part of their business model included focusing on construction within a 90-minute radius of San Jose, which allowed them to create a tight network of subcontractors and suppliers. "We wanted it so everyone who did a job for us knew me, Chuck, or both of us, and they had access to us any time of day," said Dan.

Since then, the company they created at the Breeding's kitchen table has completed hundreds of millions of dollars in construction, from restoration of historical public buildings to building structures for high technology. And although the Breedings sold the business six years ago to Tony Mirenda, the son of Dan's former mentor from the Carl N. Swenson Con-

struction Company, they both stayed on with the business—Dan as COO and Sheila as CFO. "I told Tony when he bought the business, 'I will stay with you as long as my health is good, or until you get tired of me, or if I'm no longer having fun,'" Dan said. "I've got 30 years of my life invested in this town. I don't have the 365 days a year, 24/7 pressures resting on my shoulders anymore, but I make sure that the company stays very successful." Unquestionably, the Breedings have left an indelible mark on this southern San Francisco Bay Area city, in particular, the refurbishment of the historical landmark St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown San Jose, and the 2.5-million-square-foot Cochrane Business Ranch in Morgan Hill.

The Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph, formerly St. Joseph Cathedral (it was elevated to basilica status in 1997), is the oldest parish in Cali-



*Dan & Sheila enjoy spending their free time in the great outdoors, traveling to and from their destinations in a Cessna 206 turbo plane or their luxury Marathon coach.*

fornia, and according to Dan and Sheila, "our legacy for San Jose." We started restoring it in 1987 when the company was very young, just two or three years old," Dan said. Indeed, restoring a church structure is a fitting legacy for Dan, who for the past few years has been heavily involved in remodeling, as well as building new churches. "I've done so many that now I'm Greek, Jewish, I'm Presbyterian, and I'm Catholic," he said laughing. "And now we're doing a Samoan church." Because much of the money is funded through the donations of a congregation, there is a more personal and passionate stake in it than in other structures. Dan's experience of serving on the board of directors at his own church has provided him with an insider's understanding of church politics and how they function. "For me, building a church is sort of my ministry," he said. "I understand the needs of the church and I understand that the money is coming from working people, like you and me, so you have to be held accountable for that."

For the Breedings, that dedication to accountability has spilled over into their community through their abundant charitable and philanthropic work. Over the years, between them they have given generously of their time to more than 20 different religious, political, and service organizations. Although they have scaled back somewhat, Sheila continues to donate her time and energy to the American Cancer Society and the Cattle Baron's Ball, while Dan sits on the advisory committee for the mayor. In 2008, they were named "Distinguished Citizens of the

Year" by the Santa Clara County Council, Boy Scouts of America.

As busy as they are, one wonders when the couple ever finds time for a little R&R, but they do. In their free time, the Breedings like to fly their Cessna 206 turbo plane to outdoor destinations for hunting, fishing, and skiing excursions; they are also avid San Jose Sharks hockey fans. Both are accomplished cooks, too. After attending acclaimed chef and cookbook author Hugh Carpenter's Camp Napa Culinary seminars, Dan discovered that he had a proclivity for Asian cuisine. "He never cooked a day in his life until 1993 when he attended the camp," Sheila said, amused. "It's stir fry, so it's healthy and you can't make very many mistakes with it unless you throw too much garlic in it," said Dan. Finishing Dan's sentence, Sheila added, "The key is having your heat hot enough, otherwise you're just sautéing." And not only have the Breedings returned to the Napa school for the past eight years to hone their skills, enjoy a seven-course repast, and imbibe in the fine Napa vineyards wine, they have also installed a complete outdoor kitchen on their patio. "It's bigger than our inside kitchen," Sheila said. "I bought a commercial wok that sounds like a 747," Dan boasts. "I put in a pizza oven, and I've got a super-sized barbecue with two 75,000-Btu burners, so I can cook pot stickers with two skillets! It's fun and it cleans up easy; I just hose it down when we're done cooking!" They recently hosted a pizza party for 50 people. "We just got everything out and everybody



*Dan loves their outdoor kitchen, which has a pizza oven and a commercial wok. Dan's specialty is Asian cuisine.*

started making their own pizza; My job was to put them in the oven and cook them. It's great for entertaining clients rather than taking them out for dinner," he said.

When they're not in the backyard barbecuing, they enjoy getting away, especially now with their Marathon coach, although the Breedings are no strangers to the RV lifestyle. They started out in the early '70s renting a Winnebago so they could go fishing with friends who owned a trailer. "We rented it for \$100 a week and 3 cents a mile," said Sheila. From there, they moved up to a camper, then to a fifth wheel, and through a variety of motorhome models; however, Dan said he was always enamored with Prevost. "We attended a Country Coach rally in Albany. It was the first rally we'd ever been to and we went for a ride in a Prevost," he said. The Breedings had heard great things about Marathon, so after spending a few days on the Oregon coast, they visited the Marathon facility and took a coach out for a test drive.

"I was very impressed," Dan said. "Somebody had given us two bottles of wine which were sitting out on the table. We went out on Interstate 5—eight miles up and back—and we looked at those two bottles of wine and they

hadn't moved. In the other motorhome, they would have been flying. Driving a Marathon is like driving a Mercedes—it's a treat."

And because first-class service has always been such an important component in their business, Dan and Sheila especially appreciate Marathon's commitment to excellent service. "We can't believe the quality of the service at Marathon," said Sheila. "We came here and, my gosh, we're treated like royalty!"

A flourishing business, an incredibly blissful marriage and a shared passion for life, giving back to community, and each other—the Breedings have certainly discovered the winning recipe for success. But what is their secret ingredient? Dan offered a one-word answer. Raising his finger and pointing upward, he said, "God." Then he added, "Over the years, I've had three life-changing experiences: when I married Sheila, when I turned my life over to God, and when we started the business."

"We've been very blessed," Sheila agreed. "If you do all things with the right intention, things will unfold the way they're supposed to. It happens sometimes without your even realizing it; things come your way that you couldn't even imagine." •