

Real Estate Profile

Wooden-door maker carves an ornate niche

Woodverks of Sarasota Inc. makes sturdy doors the old-fashioned way

By STEPHEN FRATER

stephen.frater@heraldtribune.com

SARASOTA — For a guy who got kicked out of high school wood shop class, Jeffery Stearns has come a long way.

Old World craftsmanship is alive and well at Woodverks of Sarasota Inc., a custom designer and builder of doors, furniture and architectural casework.

We are not talking of manufactured doors or even computer-controlled machined doors. These portals are old-school all the way: handmade, oak-pegged, resin-glued, cedar, ash, mahogany and maple masterpieces.

The interior doors start at about \$650 and can run up to \$1,500 each. The exteriors start at about \$2,500 and can cost as much as \$25,000 for an arched, 12-foot-high pair.

Some of the monster exterior doors are 3 inches thick and weigh hundreds of pounds each.

Not only do the doors, the company's primary product, meet Florida's stringent hurricane code, they exceed it by a long shot, says Jeffery Stearns, Woodverks' 48-year-old founder and chief executive.

The state code calls for a minimum of "three strong points, but our exterior doors offer seven," he said.

In business since 1993, the company makes about 1,100 doors each year for total sales of about \$750,000.

In the 5,000-square-foot workshop, fragrant with Spanish cedar, an unusual egalitarianism survives.

All the three master craftsmen, Kenny Parmenter, Orlando Reynoso and Jose Olvera, make the same salary. With benefits and bonuses, it comes to

\$50,000-\$60,000 per year.

Woodverks is one of a just few high-end custom woodworking shops in Sarasota. Forest Products Supply and Marvin's Woodworking Inc. are Woodverks' main competitors.

Pride of workmanship permeates the company. Stearns hangs the main doors personally.

The Ohio native learned woodworking as a four-year apprentice to Vaughan Hardman, a Mennonite wood-master.

Hardman, whose name suited him well, built barns for a living. "He was 6-foot-4, 260 pounds with red hair and huge hands," Stearns recalled.

Today Stearns' creations can be found all over America.

He is halfway through a total renovation job for a huge upper East Side mansion in Manhattan that required 86 mahogany doors for a total tab of "about \$500,000."

Locally, Woodverks works as a subcontractor to Albrecht Cabinets Inc., which supplies much of the woodwork for John Cannon Homes.

He has also done woodwork for local contractors and developers including Bruce Saba, John Milton and Metrics Construction.

Jeff Albrecht thinks Stearns' doors are "over-engineered" in terms of quality. Albrecht ordered a massive, 12-foot-tall arched pair for a custom home under construction at the Founders Club.

Stearns will probably wind up doing a lot more woodwork for him, Albrecht says.

Woodverks operates in a bit of a time warp. The company doesn't accept credit cards, and does virtually no marketing.

"Fifty percent down and 50 percent on delivery, is the deal,"



STAFF PHOTO / STEPHEN FRATER

Master woodworker Jose Olvera places oak pegs into an interior cedar door at Woodverks on Wednesday. Some of the company's exterior doors are 3 inches thick and weigh hundreds of pounds.

period, Stearns said.

Much of the raw material Woodverks uses comes from Brazil through Port Manatee, but the quality has slipped in recent years while prices have doubled, Stearns said.

He thinks the Brazilian wood industry is "trying to enter our market with finished product

and may be holding the higher quality lumber back for their personal use."

Lumber which cost \$4 per board-foot a few years ago now cost \$8.

In the end, it's all about the craftsmanship, Stearns said. He uses age-old woodworking techniques, including "dowels, bis-

cuits and resins" as opposed to more modern and cheap manufacturing processes.

Laminates? Never.

Veneer? Impossible.

Does he use his own doors in his home?

"Well no, much to my wife's chagrin. It's like the cobbler's kids without shoes."