

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

Dream Builders

Tyler Home Attracts National Spotlight

By Nancy McQuiston



Ask developer Mark Mahaffey what it was like to create the Home and Garden Television (HGTV) Dream Home 2005, and he'll likely smile and say, "There are two sides to every major accomplishment.

"You don't want to talk to a mountain climber 15 minutes after he comes off the hill. His nose is still defrosting, and he's tired and dehydrated. That's not when you want to ask him what it felt like to be on top of the world," says Mahaffey.

The Dream Home is a 5,000-square-foot, three-level resort home on the shore of Lake Tyler, with a 1,200-square-foot boat-house-guest suite. Normally, a project of this magnitude could take 18 months to build.

But Mahaffey and his son, builder Bill Mahaffey, did not have the luxury of that kind of time. Instead, the house was designed and built in 11 months. A mere five months passed from the time the slab was poured until the finishing touches were put on the mammoth project.

The Mountain Calls

How did this story begin? How did an East Texas town become the site of HGTV's ninth Dream Home?

A few years back, Mahaffey and his partners were planning The Reserve at Lake Tyler (www.reservelaketyler.com), a high-end development of wooded lots and private lakes on Lake Tyler. One partner suggested entering the development in a competition to be the site of an HGTV Dream Home. Having a dream home on the property, she insisted, would generate an enormous amount of free national publicity for The Reserve through the sweepstakes featuring the home as a prize.

Mahaffey was not familiar with the network and the home giveaway, so he says he was not initially impressed with the idea. But his partner continued to harangue him at every opportunity.

"She just kept whispering, 'HGTV, HGTV,' every time she saw me, until I finally agreed to submit a proposal to the network," Mahaffey says.

The partnership's proposal was one of more than a thousand submitted. It described the unspoiled beauty of the The Reserve at Lake Tyler and the small-town atmosphere of the area along with its big-city amenities — sophisticated medical facilities and institutes of higher education, for example.



“PROJECT OF A LIFETIME” might not sufficiently convey the focus and effort developer Mark Mahaffey (left) and builder Bill Mahaffey had to devote to the Dream Home 2005 to complete the undertaking within HGTV’s short timeline. Below, Bill (left) works with a surveyor in the early stages of the project while a television camera records the action. The network’s camera crews filmed progress at intervals, culminating in the filming of the HGTV Dream Home 2005 special (bottom).



A picture of a sunset over Lake Tyler caught the eye of Jack Thomasson, HGTV’s project manager for the dream home, pushing the proposal past the first cut. HGTV then sent criteria for the project to the remaining competitors. The Reserve staff scrambled to get a more detailed proposal to the network within the five days allowed.

When Thomasson came to Tyler to evaluate the site, things went smoothly. In fact, that’s something of an understatement. Thomasson warmed immediately to the community’s friendly East Texas ambiance.

“I think the thing Jack really enjoyed about coming here — this may sound funny — is that we do deals with our hearts here,” Mahaffey explains. “Some people get it; some people don’t. When Jack walked in the door, he figured it out real quick.”

As part of the tour of The Reserve, Mahaffey took Thomasson out on Lake Tyler. As they were cruising along, one of the bald eagles that winter on a small island across the lake sailed over the boat, making an unforgettable impression on the visitor.

“He jokingly accused us of trapping that eagle and releasing it as the boat passed by,” Mahaffey laughs. “But we have things here that people think they have to go to Oregon or Alaska to see.”

There was one hitch. Mahaffey originally planned to build the house on one of the nine private lakes in The Reserve, but

Thomasson wanted the Dream Home across the road, on the shore of 2,500-acre Lake Tyler. So the site was changed to one adjacent to the development’s clubhouse.

Gathering the ‘Right Stuff’

The partnership got the official word that it had been selected to build the 2005 Dream Home in November 2003. HGTV planned to film an hour-long television tour of the house beginning in October 2004, to be aired on the first day of the sweepstakes, Jan. 1, 2005. The grueling timeline was set. The house had to be completed, furnished and decorated by Oct. 1.

The project immediately cranked into overdrive. Fortunately for Mahaffey, he did not have to spend much time assembling a project team. He already knew he would be working with his son Bill and architect Antonio Flamenco. He also planned to do business with many of the subcontractors he had come to trust and respect during his 20-plus years as a developer in Tyler.

“We pretty much came as a team,” Mahaffey says. “I think that surprised Jack Thomasson and HGTV.”

Flamenco, Thomasson and the Mahaffeys toured Tyler to get a sense of local architecture before sitting down to toss around ideas of how to imbue the house with a Texas spirit and make it unique. At the end of the evening, Flamenco came up with a preliminary sketch of the house that closely resembles the final structure. The final architectural plans were drawn up in less than a month; engineering plans were not completed until April.

Climbing the Precipice

Site clearing began in May. From this point on, crews were working full time six and a half days a week, taking Sunday mornings off. The only other time they stopped work was when HGTV crews arrived to film the progress.

That was when having a good working relationship with the subcontractors made a big difference.





MASSIVE CEDAR ceiling beams, ten-foot doors and a 38-foot-high limestone fireplace create the enormous scale of the home's great room (left). Six hundred tons of Texas limestone were used in the house and landscaping. An expansive breezeway between the great room and the master suite (below) is easily the most unusual feature of the house. To view other rooms, visit www.hgtv.com/hgtv/dream_home.

The filming "was a big inconvenience for us, because our guys would have to take a break, sometimes for three or four hours," says Mahaffey. "Most subcontractors would just say, 'Hey, we won't come out that day,' but I had to say, 'No, I need you to come out anyway.'"

While some specialty subcontractors came out of the Dallas area, "most of the guys live within 15 miles of the house," says Mahaffey. "So many wonderful guys and gals concentrated so much time and effort on this one home in a short period of time."

Not surprisingly, there was no shortage of suppliers wanting to donate fixtures and materials to the house in exchange for the national publicity. The house includes roughly \$500,000 worth of donated materials, including the \$65,000 swimming pool and the \$85,000 appliance package.

According to Mahaffey, there would have been more donations if the construction timeline had been longer.

"A lot of the disappointments that Bill and I and the partners experienced on a day-to-day basis stemmed from not always having the right supplier to donate something to the home," says Mahaffey. "If I'd had a year to build this house, I think we probably could have cut the cost to the partnership in half, because we would have had time to visit with manufacturers of certain products and given them time to research HGTV, come here with their own people, negotiate, and do a little planning to put their products in the house."

Mahaffey notes that the house was finished on schedule, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of his son Bill and the



other 620 people who “touched” the house. HGTV crews filmed the television special in late October as planned.

Interestingly, the final contract transferring ownership of the home from The Reserve to HGTV was not signed until November.

Digging Down Deep

Without question, developing the Dream Home was more challenging than most projects.

“Risk is a fascinating, exciting element of life,” Mahaffey says. “On this project, I have to compliment my partners again and again. When the dream home became a reality, it was a huge budget item. It was actually a larger budget item than the phasing of our whole project.

“All of a sudden, we were doubling the amount of money we were putting in,” he says, “because we thought this could increase the velocity of the project and move the benchmark up on all the properties.”

Did the risk pay off?

“Yes,” Mahaffey reports. “HGTV has allowed us to get our message out a lot quicker.”

Within the first week after the Dream Home special aired in January, The Reserve received a rush of e-mail and telephone inquiries from 40 states, including Hawaii, as well as from London and Tokyo. A few resulted in lots being purchased sight unseen, for cash. A handful of prospective buyers asked if they could buy the Dream Home.

“When we talk with folks from outside this region, we know that Texas is still a good bargain,” Mahaffey remarks.

Lot sales have been brisk, with 80 tracts sold in one three-week period. While an estimated 40 percent of buyers are from the Dallas area, 20 percent are from California and 15 percent from New York.

View From the Peak

So how is the mountain climber feeling now? Pretty good, it seems.



THE TWO-STORY BOATHOUSE with garage-style glass doors that open onto the deck has proved popular with crowds touring the home.

“This is the first development I’ve ever done where I felt semiphilanthropic,” says Mahaffey. “This is really going to impact our community. The whole marketplace has been affected.

“I have four other developments in town. I’ve tracked eight to ten sales in those developments that were generated by HGTV inquiries. Other builders have called me to say the same thing.”

Comfortably seated in the great room of the dream home he created, the developer muses, “I never get tired of coming to this house. I was tired when we built it, though.

“It would be a pleasant home to own, if I could afford it. I’m not quite sure I could afford to own the rascal.” 🍷

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