

Believing the Vision

I'm a third-generation Orlandean. I was born in Orlando and I grew up here. When I was a kid I was fascinated by Lincoln Logs and Legos because you just built stuff. I always knew I wanted to be in the development business. I had always liked it, and that's going back to my grandfather and uncle dealing in the citrus industry. It was always a fun thing to get in the Jeep with them and go to the citrus groves and look at land. And my dad's real background was as a land broker, and on the weekends I remember going to the outer edges of town—which was then Kirkman Road. Nothing was there but sand dunes. My dad would explain that there would be a shopping center there, an apartment complex here, and what would become MetroWest.



My first job was when I was 15, and I worked as an assistant for a home remodeler. Steve Winchester was someone we knew,

Nearly everything that could ensure success for Craig Ustler was set in motion years ago—but it was up to him to take advantage of it. His grandfather, who had established a thriving citrus business, shared with him the gift of confidence. His parents were encouraging and educative. While he could have rested on the success of others, Ustler chose to continue moving forward by taking an unexpected path—one that began with physical labor in construction and surveying. After completing his education, he founded Ustler Development, Inc. By pursuing his quest in collaboration with developers such as Phil Rampy and Picton Warlow IV, Ustler's vision of a new Orlando has taken shape, giving downtown a new look with condos, trendy shopping/residential districts, and the red-hot restaurants Hue and Kres Chophouse. Co-founder of the nonprofit Downtown Orlando Foundation, 37-year-old Ustler has also served on the boards of the Downtown Orlando Partnership and the Downtown Arts District.

so I worked for him for a summer, painting, hanging doors, hanging drywall. The next summer I worked as a survey rod person for Dyer, Riddle. They were always looking for laborers. Putting up a house is hard work, but being a rod man was hard *construction labor*—the kind that convinces you that you need to go to college. My parents hadn't forced me to do this, but there was a built-in expectation that I was going to work. I also knew I was fortunate and was expected to go college—not that I knew what that meant.

Being a rod man was a fascinating job. You met at the office at 7 in the morning—in theory to beat the heat, but mostly to beat the rain. Then you get in a truck and drive to the undevel-

oped parcel, drive off the road into the woods and whip out a set of plans. There were hundreds of pages of surveys generated from aerial views, but now you've got to map it on the ground. The surveys tell you to go off and find a certain point so you can survey around roads and lots and golf courses and lakes and protected areas. This was in the late '80s when the design *du jour* was sprawling developments. What struck me was the massive consumption of land used to build them. I was out there with nature and wildlife and trees that in a couple of years would be houses and roads. At the time I thought it was almost an American right to take land and develop it. I hadn't developed the fundamental belief I have now about the *right way* to grow.

Back then I was responsible for "cutting line," which means I'd have to cut a clear line so the surveyor could see the prism I was holding. Then he'd shoot a laser at the prism to measure the line. So they gave me a machete and a shovel, and I'd have to cut down all the brush and obstructions between me and the surveyor so they could take an accurate reading. I'm out in 100-degree heat, running into snakes and wild boars—and I was just fine with that—but I always had a funny thing about holding a metal rod when a storm started. It's like I was holding a lightning rod. But as you can imagine, there's something macho about the job, and since it had taken an hour to trudge into the middle of the woods, you didn't want to pack up and leave just because it

Phelan Ebenhack

INTERVIEW BY GARY MCKECHNIE AND NANCY HOWELL

continued on page 235

continued from page 236

started raining.

It's funny how stuff like that sticks with you. In college, I took a surveying class I never had to go to since I knew it already. I didn't even need a machete or a shovel. All they surveyed was university parking lots.

Since I couldn't get my real estate license until I was 18, the first summer I came home from college I had to work nights at Stein Mart so I could take real estate classes during the day. Other summers I worked for an appraisal company and I worked for Epoch Properties, which had built this huge apartment complex for Disney employees. I would do "punch out," which was getting the units ready for people to move in. I was in charge of making sure every unit was ready, walking people through and making sure the lights and stove worked, the paint was right... That was a good job and it taught me a lot of what I still use today.

Any confidence I learned probably came from my grandfather, who was the citrus baron of the family. He was an unwavering, focused, confident guy. I spent a lot of time with him during the summers, and that was the traditional set up: the grandfather who was the family patriarch, who led the family discussions, and who was married for 60 years. This was the model. So I must have picked things up from him and I've been confident in everything I've done. That was a personality trait he had, and there was an expectation to succeed. I grew up with that.

It's funny, but when you're 20, you don't see these Old Orlando connections coming together. By the time you're 25 you may think you're gaining some success because you went out and got an education and you're a little sharper, but then you realize that's only part of it. By the time you're 30 you really know that because of these connections you know someone and your family knows someone, so I'd be foolish to say I wasn't raised in a good situation and with a good set of circumstances. But on the same token, any idea that I wouldn't work or I would just have something given to me or that I could goof off never even remotely crossed the realm of possibilities.

The tipping point in my life was getting passionate enough about what I wanted to do so I could put up with the risk. My grandfather faced a lot of naysayers in the

citrus industry, and that's how it happens in the real estate business. Everybody wants to tell you why something won't work, and then we go ahead and do it and it works. There's nothing more motivating than someone who acts like I don't know what I'm doing, someone who tells me because they know more than me just why I can't do something. That's *extremely* motivating to me.

Sure it's easy to tell someone to go out and learn what they want to do, get focused, and then go and do it, but the reality is that you have to get passionate enough and committed enough and believe in it enough where you're willing to take the risks to get it going. Because when you get passionate about what you're doing and you believe it in your soul, then it becomes a vision thing and you have to validate your vision. *TM*

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