

Homebuilder DiPrima recalls early years in business; Sangiorgio joins team

By Ken Datzman

Builder Joseph “Joe” DiPrima has seen a few housing cycles during his years in business in Brevard County.

He started building here more than 60 years ago after moving to Brevard from Miami.

DiPrima has continuously operated his Satellite Beach company, DiPrima Homes, maneuvering it through some rough-and-tumble bear housing markets. An example is 1970, when NASA canceled future Apollo missions, citing the cost of sending astronauts to the moon.

That decision sent homebuilders scurrying to other areas of Florida to do business.

“In the early 1970s, a lot of builders left Brevard County and went to Dade County, Palm Beach County, and to other markets in the state because the rest of Florida was doing fine economically,” said DiPrima, in a telephone interview from his summer home in Linville, North Carolina. Linville, near Boone, North Carolina, is in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

While builders have come and gone over the past six decades in Brevard, DiPrima Homes has been a constant in this market known for its quality craftsmanship.

“We have always kept tight control over our operations. We have never extended ourselves through land purchases. And we have never been high-volume builders,” said DiPrima, who has an MBA degree in finance and accounting from the University of Miami.

His company has won a host of builder awards, statewide and locally. DiPrima was inducted into the Space Coast Home Builders and Contractors Association Hall of Fame in 2021.

In recent years, DiPrima has taken on an oversight role as company president. He has a veteran leadership team that runs the day-to-day operations of the business, some of whom have been with the company for 35 years and longer. “I keep in touch with them. In fact, I am getting ready to have a conference call with the staff. We have a staff meeting every week.”

DiPrima added that he is excited about the future of the company because his grandson — Evan McCluan — is joining the business this month. “Evan is a graduate of the University of Florida with a degree in construction management. We are looking forward to his coming aboard.”

McCluan, who earned his bachelor’s degree from UF’s M.E. Rinker Sr. School of Construction Management, worked for DiPrima Homes during the summers. He is a 2023 graduate of UF, which is ranked among the top 10 construction management programs in the nation.

History is the collective memory of people and DiPrima has seen firsthand how the Space Coast has evolved, how communities have been developed, and how entrepreneurs have made things happen in this county because of their vision.

Like much of Florida in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Brevard County was undeveloped.

“When I came here, Indian Harbour Beach was just beginning to be developed,” said DiPrima. “Marty McGuire was developing there. And Percy Hedgecock and his brothers were developing Satellite Beach. Both



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Jena Sangiorgio is a new home sales specialist at DiPrima Realty. She has worked as a Realtor for more than 20 years, in Orlando and Brevard. Sangiorgio is at DiPrima Homes’ Villa Lucca Grande model at St. Andrews Manor in Suntree. The home just sold for \$975,000. A smaller version of the home — the Villa Lucca model — will be built at Casa Bella, a new home community in Melbourne. DiPrima has purchased the remaining 12 home sites in the community.

Marty and Percy saw opportunity.”

He continued, “Back then, the pickings were slim for housing and services. There was a grocery store in Indialantic and a grocery store in Cocoa Beach. In-between, there were no grocery stores and very few stores of any kind. Patrick Air Force Base was the big development in that area. That is where all the building was happening.”

In 1940, the government built Naval Air Station Banana River, which later transitioned to Patrick Air Force Base and now Patrick Space Force Base. This military installation was the first of many federal government investments in projects that aided the development of Brevard County.

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DiPrima Homes

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In the late 1950s, the government opened the Long Range Proving Ground, which later became Kennedy Space Center. This helped stimulate development in the county.

Where Brevard had once been considered a “back-woods” area of Florida, the space program attracted highly educated workers and scientists.

The husband-and-wife team of Marty and Veronica McGuire were instrumental in the early growth of Indian Harbour Beach. They built The Pines Resort and Apartments. And Percy Hedgecock was the first mayor of Satellite Beach.

DiPrima said at the time there was one movie theater in Melbourne called the Van Croix. It was located on U.S. Highway 1. That was the only movie theater in Melbourne until the early 1960s. Originally opened in 1925, the Van Croix had closed by 1970 and was demolished in 1974.

DiPrima recalls the first home he built in Brevard. It was in Indian Harbour Beach. The 1,850-square-foot home with a tile roof sold for \$21,900.

“And I made a profit of about \$3,500. This was in 1961,” he said.

On the 50th anniversary of his company, DiPrima said he drove down the street where he built his first single-family home.

“It’s still in pretty good shape. I was curious as to who lived there now. So, I walked up to the door and rang the bell. The door opened and this nice lady with a smiling face looked at me and said, ‘Joe! And I said Mary, how are you?’ Her family has lived there for 50 years. She told me the only complaint she had was that the original Frigidaire Fair Range, which was popular at the time, had broken down and she couldn’t find anything quite like it. She had to replace it with a different unit.”

DiPrima told that story in an interview published in the Dec. 14, 2015, issue of “BBN.”

“One thing I love about our company is its rich history,” said Realtor Jena Sangiorgio, a new home sales specialist with DiPrima Realty, part of DiPrima Companies. “The DiPrima name and the DiPrima brand are well known throughout the region.”

“I have been doing new home sales for more than 20 years with builders. Most of those years were in Orlando. I’ve spent the last seven years in the Brevard market. With DiPrima Realty, I have a lot more flexibility in my job compared to other organizations I worked for,” she added.

Sangiorgio joined DiPrima Realty in May 2022. “I work with customers from start to finish in the new home-buying process. I have worked with all types of buyers, including people making their first home purchases. Now I am selling luxurious homes for DiPrima Realty and meeting people from all over the world.”

The DiPrima model Villa Lucca Grande at St. Andrews Manor in Suntree just sold for \$975,000, she said. It has 3,033 square feet of living space.

The home has four bedrooms and three-and-a-half bathrooms. There is crown molding and high-end finishes. The space includes a leisure room and a study. And the lanai of this home provides outdoor living at its best with fantastic sunsets from the serene setting.

“It was the last new home for sale in the St. Andrews Manor community,” said Sangiorgio. “We are showing this home to people to give them an idea of the features available and the overall look of the home if they decide to have DiPrima build this model on their own lot.”

She added, “We will have a smaller version of the model — the Villa Lucca — in our new-home community

Casa Bella. It’s an established community in Suntree, situated right off North Wickham Road. We have purchased the 12 remaining home sites there. So, we will be the exclusive builder until the community is built-out. Three lots have been sold. One is going to be our model. And we should have the model ready around December, when we turn the Villa Lucca Grande at St. Andrews Manor over to the homeowner.”

Sangiorgio said DiPrima also has seven lots at Laguna Village in Melbourne. “And we are going to be building homes in Titusville at The Shores at Tranquility. We’re excited about that. It’s going to be like a ‘mini-city’ within Titusville. The sidewalks will be 10-foot wide, able to accommodate golf carts. There will be lakes and an amenity center.”

The Shores at Tranquility is a private, gated development that includes 62 waterfront lots and 37 lots with water access. The development fronts the shores of the Intracoastal Waterway.

“Reasonably priced developable land in Brevard is hard to find,” said DiPrima.

“The large builders have bought up a lot of acreage in Brevard and are developing communities. It used to be that smaller builders, like myself, could go into a community, develop lots, and sell them to two or three builders.”

And he has seen the price of swimming pools run up over the years. “The people in the pool business are doing incredibly well. I remember when I could have a pool built for \$10,000 to \$15,000. Today, I can’t build a pool for less than \$50,000, and it takes from six months to a year.”

According to “HomeGuide,” the average cost for an in-ground pool in Florida is between \$35,000 and \$60,000, depending on the features.

Originally from New York, DiPrima grew up in an entrepreneurial family. His grandfather owned The Hotel DiPrima in Highland, New York, in the Hudson Valley. It was a summer resort for people in that area.

That was where a young Joe DiPrima was first introduced to the real estate development world.

“My grandfather bought the hotel in 1926 and operated it for 40 years. He sold it in 1966. It was a great place for a kid growing up. I had the opportunity to leave New York City every summer and be at the hotel. I started working there when I was 9 years old. I worked at the hotel all the way through college. I enjoyed the experience. We had 71 rooms which could accommodate up to 150 people.”

The Hotel DiPrima had a steady flow of customers and business was good. The seven-day room rent included three meals “and we had barbecues, cookouts, and other gatherings for the guests. The highest price we ever received for all that was \$77 a week. It was around 1965. We had a restaurant and cocktail lounge in the hotel. It was a nice setting. In the off-season, we kept the cocktail lounge open.”

DiPrima made his way to South Florida when his father “decided he was going to build a hotel in Miami. We moved to Miami in 1951. At the time, there were not many hotels. Two of the best-known hotels were the Fontainebleau and the Eden Roc. They were Miami Beach hotels.”

He added, “In those days, the season was short because most of the hotels did not have air conditioning. After Easter, it was pretty much a dead market for the hotel business there. A lot of places closed in the summer.”

His father built a small hotel in Miami and sold it three years later, he said. “In the meantime, I had entered the University of Miami. I graduated, and then

in 1961 made the decision to move to Brevard County.”

He said the Department of Defense’s Cape Canaveral expansion in 1959 “enticed” him to start a real estate development company here. His general contracting firm built commercial properties, county facilities, and residential subdivisions.

“The housing boom in Brevard started in the early 1960s and was fueled by the space program and people moving here from other parts of the nation,” he said. “A lot of employees from Grumman Aerospace Corp. in New York were sent here to work on the Apollo program. They were given ‘swamp pay,’ a bonus, to come here because they were giving up a lot of life’s pleasures and commercial services that weren’t available in Brevard.”

Grumman was the chief contractor on the Apollo Lunar Module, the first spacecraft to land humans on the Moon. The firm received the contract in 1962 and built 13 lunar modules.

Today’s housing environment is fueling cautious optimism among builders. Limited existing inventory has placed a renewed emphasis on new-home construction.

In addition, new home construction is taking on an increasing role in the marketplace because many homeowners with loans well below current mortgage rates are electing to stay put.

Current interest rates have more than doubled from 2021. As a result, the supply of existing homes is incredibly low.

With limited available housing inventory, “new construction will continue to be a significant part of prospective buyers’ searches in the quarters ahead,” according to a report by the National Association of Home Builders, or NAHB.

“Recently, two of our best years for new home sales were in 2020 and 2021,” said DiPrima. “This was during the pandemic when a lot of people decided to move to Florida and work from their homes. An ‘open Florida’ played a big role in driving home sales for a couple of years for our company.”

An analysis of county level permit data and demographic data by the NAHB indicates that single-family home building in the first quarter of 2023 occurred mostly in counties where baby-boomers make up a majority of the population.

Based on U.S. Census Bureau data, the baby-boomer generation had the majority share of population in 2,605 counties. Generation Z had the majority share of population in 335 counties, while the millennials are the majority share in 179 counties.

The boomer market share has been increasing since the fourth quarter of 2019, when it stood at 52.6 percent of the single-family construction market. As of the first quarter of 2023, the boomer market share has increased 5.5 percent to 58.1 percent.

In general, builder confidence was up in June. Builder confidence in the market for newly built single-family homes in June rose five points to 55, according to the NAHB Wells Fargo Housing Market Index, or HMI.

This marks the sixth straight month that builder confidence has increased and is the first time that sentiment levels have surpassed the midpoint of 50 since July 2022.

All three major HMI indices posted gains in June.

“Brevard is an attractive county and people continue to discover us and move here,” said DiPrima. “We’re looking forward to the future. Brevard is positioned to grow in the years ahead and homebuilding will be part of that growth. With Evan (McCluan) joining the company, our future looks bright. In 2024, we will be starting our 63rd year in business.”