

# Irish-Canadian builders win renovator of the year award

by Diamond Devoey

**T**ORONTO – Jim Cunningham and Brendan Charters have, literally, built themselves an award-winning reputation.

Not only do they have the renovation street cred – and curb appeal and wow factor to go with it – but now they have the awards hardware to go with it, when their company, Eurodale Developments won the Building Industry and Land Development Association's renovator of the year award this past January.

"It was a huge, uplifting moment when we heard them call our name," said company co-founder Brendan Charters as he spoke on his Bluetooth while on his way to a construction site in Woodbridge, a suburb north of Toronto. "Jim and I take our company pretty seriously." While they were surprised to hear their name, they knew that the win had been hard won, well-deserved, and well-planned out.

"Renovator of the year, we've been working very hard with that," said Cunningham during a telephone interview. "We set out to get it and we got it and we're pretty happy with that."

After their win, the duo proved that not only had they worked hard, but played hard too.

"We took out all of our guys and their wives and significant others and splurged at The Keg," said Cunningham of their revels after their big win. "It was like the Stanley Cup of our industry."

The company were finalists for the same prize in 2010, and it was not lost on them that they had beat out a heavy field.

"There are literally thousands of renovators in Toronto," said Charters. "To be one out of 1,000 is a good day."

Not only were the sheer numbers of competitors large, but the criteria for winning was exacting as well.

"The Building Association governs construction in the Greater Toronto Area and southern Ontario," explained Cunningham. "They determine how our work is and they talk to 10 of our clients from the last year."

Not that they are afraid of a little hard work, but now that they have reached the pinnacle, they have no intention of letting go of the title lightly.

"As soon as you win, you realize that you have to uphold that reputation," said Charters. "As soon as we won the award, that very day I said to him (Cunningham),

in the parking lot, "You know, we have to win this next year."

Charters also noted that, so far, while some companies have won the award more than once, no company has won the same award back-to-back.

"We're both being looked at as leaders in the industry, so we have to continue to lead," said Charters. While Italian-Canadians have a justified reputation

for excellence and dominance in the construction industry, with this win, "there's a couple of Irish builders at the forefront of the Canadian construction industry," said Charters.

Cunningham also joked that, since they take pride in their work, their company and its renovations likely will not be appearing on the Holmes Inspection program, where uber-contractor Mike Holmes is known to rip into contractors and renovators who do shoddy work on houses.

"No one wants that," laughed Cunningham. They have their work cut out for them, and all of it at multiple job sites at that, with as many as 13 projects on the go at any one time.

"Sometimes it can be more, sometimes it can be less. But we don't push any business away," said Cunningham. "We try to grow the company through happy customers,"



Jim Cunningham (Production Manager) and Brendan Charters (Development Manager) of Eurodale Developments

said Charters. "You live or die by your last job."

About 20 years ago, Cunningham moved to Ottawa to study architecture at Algonquin College. There, he met Charters, who was studying carpentry at the University of Ottawa. The duo shared a house with several other guys in the downtown neighbourhood of Sandy Hill.

Cunningham was hired on by a construction firm one day after graduation, and Charters was also hired on as well.

"We gained a lot of experience and mistakes on someone else's dollar," Cunningham said with a laugh. "We felt comfortable that we could do the same (job)," by starting their own company.

Their business offices were first housed in the basement of Charters' grandmother's house when they started operations in 2003. As Cunningham and Charters were moving things around, they came across Brendan's great-grandfather's birth certificate.

"Jim and I, our heritage comes from the same area of Ireland, County Antrim," Charters said of the moment they found the old document. His own father was also proud of his Irish roots, naming him Brendan and his sister Colleen.

Both of Cunningham's parents are from Belfast, Northern Ireland, his father, Jim Sr. from Turf Lodge, while his mother Mary is from Andersonstown. Cunningham was born in Canada in 1978 the year after his family had emigrated to Canada. His father still works

at a plumber with his own company in Ajax, a town just east of Toronto.

"He left because of The Troubles and started a new life," Cunningham recalled. "He got me into it when I was young, working with my hands."

As a fellow traveller in the construction trade, his dad was of course proud of his son's achievements.

"He is very proud," said Cunningham, whose dad still works at his trade. "He's doing plumbing on his own and gets his hands dirty and (is out there) looking for jobs and getting jobs done."

Cunningham not only kept his Irish connections through his family, but also through his involvement with the Durham Emmets Gaelic Football club from age 12 to 18.

"It's good to get out there with all of the other Irish kids," Cunningham said of his time on the field. Cunningham still tries to make it over to Ireland every year whenever possible, but he has noticed just how much the downturn in the Irish economy has affected his family back home.

"All of my family is in the trades in Ireland and they're all out of work," Cunningham said.

His extended Irish family is made up of brick layers, joiners and painters. The last time he was in Belfast, "it was dead. Nobody was spending anything. Five years ago it was totally different. Every big company was building something in Ireland."



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