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## Profiles in: Green Building Jonathan Gravell

Premium content from San Antonio Business Journal - by Alison Beshur

Date: Thursday, November 4, 2010, 7:54pm CDT

Building green wasn't exactly **Jonathan Gravell's** focus when a few years ago he started his own local residential construction firm, Gravell & Company. It simply made sense to add the certifications to his arsenal of skills.

"It's kind of like green building came to me. It's just the way I've always built things my entire life, using better materials," says Gravell, 29. "Once I started researching it, (I thought) well, 'I'm already doing all of these things.' Why not just take advantage of the marketing situation at hand."

Before starting his own business, the Castroville native received a bachelor's degree in construction science from Texas A&M University, worked more than five years with a custom home builder and two years with the nation's largest country club community developer.

In recent years, Gravell has earned certifications as an aging-in-place specialist, green professional and graduate builder from the National Association of Home Builders and as a LEED-safe renovator from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This year, he received several awards, including "Remodeler of the Year" from the Texas Association of Builders.

When approaching the subject of green building with clients, Gravell uses the same acumen and common sense he used to incorporate the specialty into his niche of high-quality building and remodeling.

"If you build a house with good materials, that are meant to last a long time, you're pretty much already building green," Gravell says, noting he most often isn't the highest bidder.

Depending on what clients want, Gravell customizes the level of green building options he incorporates. Most, he says, are interested in at least energy efficiency, and he achieves this with complex calculations that consider insulation values, the size of the house, types of lighting and the direction the house faces.

For example, Gravell was able to reduce energy costs from \$260 a month to \$90 a month on a home larger than 4,000 square feet by replacing windows, lights and the air conditioning unit — changes that only added a minimal amount to the monthly mortgage.

"In order to be 'green,' you have to be efficient, but not the other way around," Gravell says. "If people knew the options for making their house more efficient, and the cost differences, most would probably take advantage."

While building codes now mandate some water efficiencies, other options — placement of a home's water heater near its fixtures, low-flow fixtures, dual-flush toilets and subsurface irrigation systems — can further reduce water waste, Gravell says.

Additionally, Gravell can help reduce harmful off-gassing by carefully selecting products, such as plywood for cabinets and paint with no or reduced amounts of volatile organic compounds, which can include benzene. For those interested in even more extreme levels of green building, Gravell says there also are solar panels and windmills.

"Building is not sticks and bricks anymore," Gravell says. "It's a science."

**Name: Jonathan Gravell**

**Position: President/Owner**

**Age: 29**

**Family: Single**

Education: Construction Science Degree from Texas A&M.

On growing up: I grew up in the middle of a field, so there wasn't a whole lot to do. You couldn't just run down to the movies. I didn't really care what I was doing as long as it was outside. I would be happy working, camping, hunting or being on a body of water somewhere.

First job: My first job was when I was about nine sweeping houses. I probably really didn't do much at nine, but I was on a job site. One of my buddy's dads was in construction and I would tag along with him. It just grew on me from that point.

On selecting construction science at Texas A&M: By the time I was old enough to go to college, I had no doubt in my mind what I wanted to do — build really cool things. Texas A&M had, and still has, the best construction program in the United States. Plus, I have a strong family tradition there.

On starting your own business: I got started actually in college with my first experience working for myself. I didn't want to work making minimum wage, so I started doing miscellaneous carpentry jobs. When I was in school, I had to do an internship. I worked for a custom home builder where I ended up going to work permanently after school. That was from 2002-06. I gained a huge amount of experience doing remodeling and new construction with this company. The time I spent with this company was invaluable. I am still best friends with my old boss to this day. In 2006, I got an incredible opportunity to go to work for the nation's largest country club community developer. They were based out of California but did work in Texas, Colorado, Nevada and Arizona. I went through their school for pretty much the first year learning how to produce 60 or more \$2 million or more homes in one year and make every one of them custom. After the first year, they moved me to Colorado for one of their project startups. It was an existing club facility, and I was in charge of all their construction operations. We updated the existing facilities, then they put everything on hold. They pretty much laid everyone off. At that point there was no doubt in my mind what I wanted to do — start my own business.

Why San Antonio: I chose San Antonio because I love the city, and it's close to my family.

Like most about your job? The best part of my job is the gratification. It is gratifying to just tell someone that we have another job, and that they get to do it with us. It is gratifying making my customers happy. It is gratifying that my customers trust me to get their projects done for them. And, it is really gratifying seeing the final product. Whether it was a raw piece of dirt or a 100-year-old home, it always turns out nice.

Like least about your job: Inefficiency — I'm not a happy camper when someone calls me and tells me there is something in their way, and they can't get started on their tasks. You then stop what you are doing, drive over to the jobsite and find out it would have taken that one person two seconds to move a piece of wood, or whatever it was, out of the way, so they could get started. Or, when you make an appointment to meet with someone, and they either don't show up or they're an hour late.

Strategy for keeping track of and coordinating all of the moving parts of a renovation or build project: I use technology to its fullest capabilities. I have all my plans on my server, and I either carry my laptop or my iPad around with me and can see the plans right there. I also have all my project files on the same server, so I can simply download whatever details or info I need even to my phone. Smartphones and e-mail are key as well. If there is a problem, you can just simply snap a picture and send it off to the appropriate people, and things get done quicker.

Key ideas you suggest for improving the efficiency of older homes: Take the example of the home I worked on in Monte Vista. That is a bit of a tricky question, because most of Monte Vista is a historic district, and that limits you to what you can do. Obviously, budget is a big factor for this question — I would start by recommending that every single homeowner perform an energy audit by an energy rater. The job of an energy rater is to come out to your house and tell you where the biggest non-performing areas are. You may have leaky windows and doors, or leaking ducts or need to add some insulation. The list goes on. As far as inefficiency goes, they can give you a prioritized order of worst to best, and tell you how to make it better. The other big thing is lighting. Changing your lighting over to compact fluorescent or LEDs can make a great difference.

Yardsticks for success: I know I've been successful when my phone rings and on the other end a person says they are a friend of so and so, and they would like me to come take a look at their project ...

Economy's impact on your business: The biggest difference that I see is the amount of people bidding on a job. And the biggest problem that I run into there are some people bidding on projects who just are not

honest. They try and low bid the job to get it and change-order the job to death. I can't stress enough that customers HAVE to check references.

Personal accomplishment are you most proud of: I am an Eagle Scout.

Professional accomplishments you are most proud of: Having such a great client base. I am still friends with every single person I've ever done work for. I'm also proud of the awards that I've already won.

Another builder you admire and why: I admire **Robert Thornton** in Boerne. There are very few builders that I have never heard a complaint about, and he's one of them. Every one, customers and trades, admires and respects him.

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Alison Beshur is a San Antonio freelance writer.