

Steven Alves of Stevens Home Improvement



by Butch
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In 1983, Steven Alves opened Stevens Home Improvement in Fairhaven, a family-run business that has thrived by employing old-fashioned service combined with innovative products and high-quality workmanship. When I had new windows installed at my house a few years back, I was impressed by the staff and the quality of the work they did.

Part of the Stevens Home Improvement mission statement reads: *“Our employees, working as a team, are our most important resource. It is only by their performance, dedication and achievements that we will remain a successful company.”*

Sometimes the words of a mission statement exist to convince people that a company will behave a certain way, even if it isn't true. With Stevens Home Improvement, I know for a fact that the mission statement is a guideline for the work they do. Let's hear from owner Steven Alves to find out more:

Tell me how it all started!

Steven: Starting at a very young age, I always liked money. When I got my allowance (\$5 per week), I would save it and then if I needed something I would ask my mom so she would pay for it. I would put my money away in my Fairhaven Savings Bank coin bank. Then when the bank got full, I would put it in the bank account. I enjoyed going to the bank to see them post the interest I had earned. At first it was only 2-3 cents a month,

but then it grew and compounded. That's when I started loaning my money to my brothers.

✘ My first job was watering the lawn at a newly constructed house near where I grew up on Spring Street in Fairhaven. I would go do errands for elderly neighbors and they would give me 15-25 cents. Then I got into cutting lawns at age 13, 5 lawns a week...\$11.25 per week...or shoveling snow in winter. I remember getting paid \$1.25 for one lawn, and when I asked for a raise to \$1.50, she said "No" and fired me! I learned a great lesson that day: Ask for what you feel you are worth. She ended up hiring me back because she couldn't find another guy cheap enough. Her new fee was \$2.00 per week.

Then one hot summer day when I was 14, I was sitting in my back yard when my neighbor Mike asked me to go for a ride with him. He was a contractor doing home improvements. He asked me if I wanted to do some work for him that summer. This was great because I would go to his house in the morning and get a ride to work. I started as an apprentice carpenter to this old-timer called "Smitty"...I was being paid \$2.00 per hour cash, when minimum wage was \$1.65.

I did this type of work for three summers until I got my license. Then I got a promotion; truck driver, cleaning up jobs, making deliveries, etc. I had to learn to drive a big red dump truck my first day of work that summer. I remember stalling the truck many times and bucking across Rte. 6, but it was another learning experience. I was now making \$8.00 per hour, 50 hours a week in 1973. So, each summer after that I would work for Mike, cut grass in the neighborhood, etc.

Where did you go to school?



The 'smart house' from Stevens Home Improvement website.

Steven: I graduated from Fairhaven High School in 1975 and enrolled at BCC for the fall semester 1975. My dad was a financial controller, my mom a bookkeeper, my brother Jack an accountant, my brother Jim a CPA, and my brother David was also working for the same home improvement company as I was. My only choice in college, I guess, was to major in accounting. After two years at BCC and two years at SMU in Dartmouth, I received my Bachelors Degree in Accounting in 1979.

In 1981, several salespeople left the company so I started to learn the art of selling...and really enjoyed it. I was only 24, and I was enjoying what I was doing, but I found out that Mike was feeling threatened by my new power that I had acquired with the workers/installers and the remaining salespeople.

Mike decided to try to remove some of my authority, and I made a choice at that time to never let another person control my life. Another learning experience.

In January 1983 Mike went on vacation and asked me to run things while he was gone for 2 weeks. Because we were now bucking heads for control, I made him an offer. If I could

sell \$75,000 in business with the salespeople then he would let me run things my way and he would take a step back.



I exceeded my goal and reached \$125,000. I was feeling really good. Mike came back from vacation and never acknowledged what I had accomplished. I asked him to go to lunch so we can discuss it. At lunch I talked and he listened and then I asked if he was going to live up to our agreement. He said what he

wanted to do was open up another home improvement company and let me run it my way and he would pay me a salary and 25% of the profits....I responded to him, "Why should I give you 75% of my profits?" He looked at me and smiled and that is when I gave him 30 days notice that I would be leaving.

Working for Mike was a tremendous learning experience: I learned what to do, what not to do, as well as all his connections in business. So, on February 14, 1983 I opened my company at the same location that Mike had started many years earlier. My first employees were Tom O'Leary, my brother David Alves, and Richard Medas. All three are still with me 28 years later. My father, John Alves (soon to be 88 years old), joined the company in 1988, my brother Jack joined in 1998. I love everybody that works for me because they are all good people. I recently hired a high school friend, Max Newman, to head up production, and Kevin Costa to administer sales development.

Tell me about some of your favorite projects.

Steven: I have historically restored two homes that I personally own. The house on 591 County Street in New Bedford is an old whaling house, built in 1863 by Oliver P. Brightman. When I bought it in 1985 it was a four family home, but I've converted it to a single family residence. My current home was

built in 1775 and is listed in the Rochester Historical Journal as the "Wheel of Fortune Tavern." I've restored it over the twenty years I have lived there with my son, Steven, daughter, Kimberly, and wife Cheryl.

One of the largest projects we completed was Fairhaven Funeral Home. Most of our work is residential remodeling. Like the old expression BASF corporation used: "We don't make the products you use, we just make them better." I look at my company the same way. Home improvements to make your life easier and better. Sunsetter Awnings, handicap accessibility, railings, sunrooms, siding, roofing, energy products that save money/heat/cooling costs. We are an Energy Star partner, which is a commitment we take seriously...as serious as customer satisfaction and our A+ rating with the Better Business Bureau.

How many people do you employ right now?

Steven: 23 employees

What are your plans/hopes for the future of Steven's Home Improvements?



The Alves family.

Steven: Since I truly love what I do and I do not consider it

a job or work, I can see myself doing this for another 40 years. My father, John Alves is 88 years old and still works every day for me in the accounting/consulting area. My son, Steven, is an AVP banker in NYC for HSBC and has no plans on coming back to this area any time soon. My daughter Kim, who runs an e-bay/online store (www.dogloverstore.com) shows no interest in home improvements. My wife Cheryl is a MDS Registered Nurse.

My plan for the company is to continue to grow it slowly. I recently hired a new production manager, Max Newman and a Sales Manager, Kevin Costa. These two highly qualified individuals came to me and were victims of the economy, but ended up being perfect fits for my company. We have also been able to hire very experienced installers- good installers are very hard to find.

We continue to tweak the company by bringing in new products, ideas, approaches etc. A lot of people think that if you are a contractor all you do is fix up houses, but there are many other areas you have consider, especially when you employ the number of people that I have. This is a 24/7, 365 business. I also want to mix in teaching to people about the correct way of getting estimates and dealing with contractors, maybe with a radio talk show about home improvements. Plus there are already a few projects I am currently working on that will be released within the coming year, so keep your eyes open for Steven's Home Improvement.