



Genia Smith

Accent Hardwood Flooring Inc.

Durham, N.C.

Flooring Durham

By Michelle Desnoyer

The whole town of Durham, N.C., seems to know Genia Smith (pronounced “Genie”). Her business, Accent Hardwood Flooring Inc., balances between historic preservation and booming new construction in this college town, and the company reflects this balance with a mix of high-end remodeling work and new construction. The Accent name can also be found supporting community organizations that both hold on to the past and push Durham toward a better future. Last November, *Hardwood Floors* spent a day with Smith to observe how she runs her business and, in the process, gives back to the city she loves.

6:45 a.m.

Typically, Smith takes less than 20 minutes from the time she wakes up to the time she arrives at the office. She prepares her staple breakfast of a super-sized jug of black coffee and heads out the door.



Smith keeps track of her notes for each job on index cards, which she files away upon her return to the office.

6:55 a.m.

Smith arrives at her showroom and office located in the heart of Durham, N.C., directly across the street from the ballpark where the Durham Bulls AAA baseball team used to play, and where the movie “Bull Durham” was filmed. Her “right-hand man,” Robert Honeycutt, already has the doors open for her. Honeycutt was the first person Smith hired when she and her partner of 28 years, Becky Burks, bought the property and started the business about 17 years ago. Smith started out in the flooring business in Arkansas working for her father before going to college and returned to run the business afterward. However, after three years, “He didn’t like the way I did things, so he fired me!” Smith laughs.

Smith turns on her computer, puts on her glasses and starts sifting through e-mails. She discovers an unpleasant one from a customer she’ll have to deal with today.

7:13 a.m.

The first of Smith’s employees start to filter in and punch their cards on the time clock. Smith’s company consists of 10 sanders and finishers, who are primarily overseen by Honeycutt, and about five installers. However, when Smith is behind on installation work, as she is today, she “steals” Honeycutt’s men for help. Part of her crew will be just up the road today, working on the company’s future showroom in Smith’s new office building. “I really couldn’t have found a better place,” Smith says of her current office, recalling how small the Durham downtown was 17 years ago before all the building started. A neighbor who owns property adjacent to Smith’s current buildings offered her the large renovated NuTread Tire building down the street “at a sweet price” in order to demolish her present building to build condos.

7:45 a.m.

Smith has already printed out Mapquest directions to each job for her crews, and she hands them out with specific

details on the job. David is the final employee to arrive—15 minutes late—and Smith informs him he will be in the office today answering the phone, since her secretary, Amy, is gone to visit her new grandbaby.

7:58 a.m.

In the midst of calling customers, Smith takes a call from Burks. The two discuss plans for their annual Christmas party for 80 to 100 family members, friends and business associates. Burks usually helps out around the office with billing and payroll, but she chooses her own hours, and today she decided to stay home to take care of the couple’s 11-year-old son, Christopher, who is home from school today.

8:30 a.m.

Smith drives to the first estimate of the day. “I coach my son’s Little League team, and one of the players said, ‘Mom, Coach Genia drives with her knee!’ and that’s because I have to do so much while driving,” Smith says as she balances her phone and index cards with job details on her other knee. As she drives, she points out jobs she did, seemingly on every corner, and recalls how when she took her son trick-or-treating, a woman said, “Hey, I know your ma!” and Christopher promptly answered, “Did she do your floors?” He’s accustomed to having a well-known mother in a town full of wood floors. Smith explains she prefers remodeling work because it’s more involved and complicated than new construction, which makes up only about 25 percent of her business. “The commercial work I do, I don’t get it because I’m the lowest bidder. I get it because I’m the one they want to do the job. Simple as that,” she says.

8:35 a.m.

Smith arrives at the first estimate, turning her phone off on the way to the house. “I never take calls on an estimate,” Smith says. This project is for a former customer who wants the same flooring Smith installed in her living room six years ago to be installed in her toddler’s room because he suffers from allergies. Most of Smith’s work comes from previous clients or referrals. She pulls out her pocketknife to take up the carpeting in the corner of the room and inspects the material underneath. While she takes measurements of the bedroom, Smith shares tips on how she helped her own son’s allergies. Smith takes out the paperwork from the previous project and the date is missing, but the homeowner remembers when Smith’s crew started the installation—it was 9/11, and she had brought down a TV so the installer could watch the news while working. Smith says she’ll call back after 10 a.m., when she can get a materials estimate to match the original product in the house. “Allergies—the wood man’s best friend,” Smith says as she climbs back in her truck and puts in a call to the distributor she deals with most often. Unfortunately, the distributor no longer carries the brand, but her contact there offers to check around and see if someone else in the area does.



Smith checks the progress on her new showroom.

8:55 a.m.

The distributor calls back to let Smith know another distributor may have the flooring she needs. She calls the other distributor, and a representative promises to look for it.

9:00 a.m.

Smith drives down a street in Chapel Hill outside of the University of North Carolina. “This is where the expensive real estate is. Right here on Franklin Street by the college,” Smith says, adding that she’s worked on several houses in the area, where homes typically sell for a few million dollars. She has also done a lot of work for local historic buildings, having just completed a repair and sand-and-finish job for historic St. Mary’s College.

Smith is on her way to check out a historic house that’s being renovated. She has previously only seen the footprint, and she wants to check in and see if anything major has changed. She didn’t really want to take this job, but the homeowner got the referral from a friend and wanted Smith for the work, no matter the cost. The job requires Brazilian cherry, which doesn’t thrill Smith because of its hardness. “But, hey, if it’s a wood floor and you want it in your house, I can do it for you!” she laughs. She says the reason the homeowner wants her to do the job so badly is because Smith has a reputation for being dependable. Since so much work is being done in the house, the timeframe is up in the air. “We’ll either start at the top and work our way down, or start at the bottom and work our way up,” she says of the four-storied mansion.

9:25 a.m.

Smith calls to check in with Honeycutt, who’s doing final walk-throughs and touch-up work on jobs recently completed—work he enjoys but Smith hates because it is tedious. “Robert is the best touch-up and repair man I have ever

seen,” she says. She recalls how, when she worked for her dad, they had to make everything on their own, including filler and tablesaws. And the downside to being a woman in the wood flooring business in those days? No Porta Potties, so she often had to drive somewhere when nature called.

9:30 a.m.

Smith’s distributor calls back and lets her know the manufacturer stopped producing the brand from the previous estimate, but he was able to find something similar. Smith agrees with his choice and gets a materials cost estimate for the bedroom.

9:46 a.m.

Smith arrives at a job site in Raleigh, which is a little farther out of her territory than she likes to go, but since this was a previous customer, she makes an exception. The homeowners are adding on to their house and have a new garage with an apartment above it. In the midst of chaos between several different trades, Pete, one of her lead guys, is working on a transition for the sliding glass door leading out to a balcony. The two walk through the house where Smith installed flooring several years ago, and she notices that someone repaired the red oak floor she installed with two pieces of white oak. “We’re not doing any work on these floors, so don’t replace it,” she tells Pete. They measure the apartment above the garage and count the stairs. Smith tells Pete they will probably be able to start there, since most of the work is done.



Smith’s mobile office.

10:20 a.m.

Smith calls the customer from the first estimate, lets her know about the difficulty finding the flooring, and offers to drop off a sample later this afternoon.

10:23 a.m.

One of Smith’s workers calls to let her know his work truck died on him. She suggests filling the radiator with water to try to get it closer to their neighborhood repair shop, and then to wait for one of the other guys to come pick him up.

10:26 a.m.

While on the road to the next job site, Smith makes her daily call to Mama in Louisiana, who laments her unsuccessful attempts at trying to make a grandson’s new girlfriend eat, and



Smith explains job details to employee Alfonzo Elliott.

tells how she has rearranged the furniture in her bedroom.

10:34 a.m.

Smith checks on Alfonzo, who is working alone in a new café for an office building. The project is somewhat unusual in that he has to install prefinished flooring as paneling around the outside of a counter. "Sometimes, I don't know how I get roped into this," Smith says. Normally, she wouldn't do this type of work, but she has done many floors for this customer.

11:20 a.m.

Smith secures short-term "boss parking" on the front lawn of her building and goes into the office to answer e-mails and make calls. She discovers "good mail:" a check from one of her biggest builders. She also sees an e-mail from the Durham Preservation Society, of which she and Burks are big supporters, about a party tonight. Instead of traditional marketing, Smith opts for supporting organizations like the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the Durham Arts Council and the theater. "Every year, the Yellow Pages ad gets smaller and smaller," she says. She also sponsors her son's baseball team, which she coaches four nights a week. Tonight, Coach Smith is throwing a pizza party for the players, but she hopes to make it to the end of the Preservation Society function.

11:30 a.m.

Honeycutt calls to let Smith know he has extra time, so he can do a recoat he had scheduled for next week. Smith checks the wall, where three dry-erase boards map out what crew will be at which job. She lets him know that he can also put on the shoe molding for that project. Smith credits the communication she has with Honeycutt for why the business runs like a well-oiled machine.

Smith comes across a note on her desk reminding her to complete an inspection report. As a NOFMA-certified inspec-

tor, she goes on one or two inspections a week. "I always make sure I get paid before I release the results of an inspection," she says. "People get mad about the results sometimes."

11:58 a.m.

Usually, Burks packs a lunch for Smith and she eats it in her car or at her desk, but today she is meeting Burks and Christopher for lunch at the American Tobacco Project, which is a series of old Lucky Strike tobacco factory buildings renovated from ruin and converted into a shopping center. While Smith says her bids were too high to secure any of the original installation work on the project, she says that in a couple of years the area will become a steady source of floorwork in terms of the repair, resanding and refinishing work she'll get. Over lunch, Smith and Burks discuss their plans for an upcoming Christmas trip to Southeast Asia. Six years ago, Smith had an offer to buy her business and, although it was a lot of money, it wasn't enough to retire on, and she had to evaluate what it was she really wanted. "What I decided was, I have a business that I love, and I like doing what I'm doing. If I had anything different, I would take time off and I would travel more. So you know what I did? I started taking time off and traveling more," she laughs.



Smith and her son choose gifts to give to his Little League teammates at the pizza party that night.

1:15 p.m.

Smith and her son stop by a small souvenir shop to pick out gifts to give to the players at the pizza party tonight.

1:31 p.m.

Smith stops by her new office building to see how her guys are doing with the showroom. She and her lead worker discuss where to put a medallion. While talking, she receives a call from one of her guys in the field and answers his questions about finishing.

1:44 p.m.

One of the builders who had a job lined up for Monday calls to say his crew is behind schedule and asks Smith if her work can be done on Tuesday instead. Smith says sure,



Smith works on collecting payments from homeowners.

and she calls a homeowner with whom she had prior scheduling problems and asks if she can drop the flooring off this afternoon so it can acclimate. The homeowner agrees, and Smith calls Honeycutt to see if he knows of anyone who will be getting done early. He gives her the name of one of her guys, but she doesn't want to send him because of his propensity for getting lost. Someone else is almost done, though, and she designates him for the task.

1:50 p.m.

Smith arrives at a music store in downtown Durham, just blocks away from her office, to do an estimate. The building was previously leased, and the owners want to resand and refinish the areas where the former tenants' office chairs damaged the floor. The customer also wants it done over the weekend, and although Smith doesn't work on the weekends and doesn't require her crews to, she does pay handsomely for workers who want to come in. She remembers that one worker had asked for overtime, so she calls Honeycutt to ask him to get in touch with the worker to let him know he'll get paid double time for coming in Friday night to sand and finish one coat, and Saturday to do the second coat.

2:05 p.m.

Smith suddenly wonders if her guy installing the medallion has an actual compass. "How bad would it look if a wood man installs a compass medallion pointing the wrong way?" she asks. She calls him and finds that he is way ahead of her and already has the medallion laid in the proper direction. Most of Smith's employees have worked with her for many years, and she trusts them a great deal and enjoys working with them.

2:17 p.m.

Smith uses colorful language to describe her next customer, an unpleasant man who had sent the nasty e-mail this morning. She stops by his house in a new development to

inspect a repair job that was supposed to fix damage left by another tradesman. The customer complained that the flooring around the repair has been scratched up, and he refuses to pay. "I really can't imagine my guy doing something like that," Smith says, so she wants to check it out. Luckily for her, the homeowner appears to be gone for the day. She travels to the house next door to do an estimate for a new installation. She works with this builder a lot because the builder has a high success rate for selling homes and spares no expense in making sure they are of the highest quality. Smith measures and inspects the subfloor. She notices that, because of the joists, the flooring will need to switch direction several times in the house.

2:54 p.m.

Smith returns more calls in the truck. She checks on the workers she asked to deliver the prefinished flooring to make sure they have the right materials and know how to get to the place. Typically, in the afternoons, she checks on her workers again as she did in the morning. Honeycutt does the same, when he's not doing repair work. Smith likes to be at jobs particularly when her employees are starting so she can make sure everything is set up correctly and everyone knows what the job requires.

3:01 p.m.

The effects of Smith's breakfast have worn off, so she stops at a café for another cup of coffee.

3:18 p.m.

Smith stops in to check on her guys at the new office site. She sees that the showroom is coming along well.

3:30 p.m.

Smith returns to her office to take care of e-mail, phone calls and paychecks for her crew. She makes a point of being in the office in the afternoons after her final check on the crew, so people know they can reach her there at that time.

4:00 p.m.

Workers start filtering in as they finish up their jobs and hand in their time slips that record where they were, for how long and what work they did. Honeycutt comes in, and he and Smith discuss what got done today and what needs to be done next week.

4:30 p.m.

On Fridays, Smith goes through the folders she has on projects and sees who hasn't paid on completed work. "I figure, three weeks for homeowners and four weeks for builders," she says. She discovers an unpaid project from October, gives the homeowner a call and receives a promise that the homeowner will be dropping off the check soon.

5:30 p.m.

Smith packs up her stuff to go home to get ready for her pizza party. ■