

# THE COSTCO CONNECTION

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A lifestyle magazine for Costco members

## Holmes-grown success

The construction is sturdy, the foundation solid. How high can Mike Holmes build his empire? **32**

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# Holmes is where the hearth is

**Contractor-turned-celebrity has built his success on honesty, integrity and a passion for doing things right**

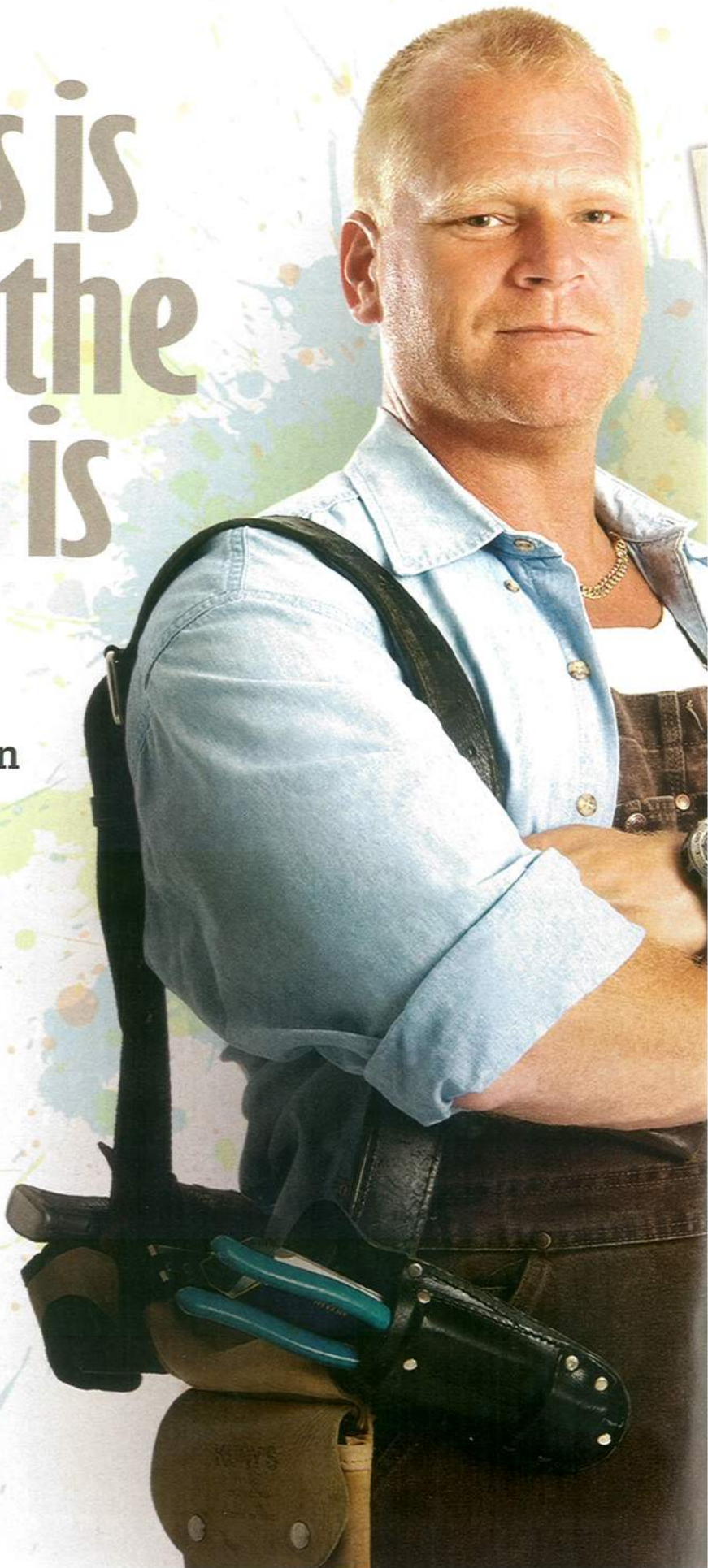
**By Mark Cardwell**

A DECADE AGO, Lady Luck smiled on Mike Holmes, a professional builder/contractor since the age of 19. Holmes was hired to build a big straw-bale custom home for Michael Quast, a local television executive who produced a home-repair show and other lifestyle programs for specialty channels such as HGTV.

During a break, Holmes started telling Quast about how sick he was of fixing botched jobs done by so-called professional contractors—debacles that often left people's financial and personal lives in ruins. "I went on a 30-minute rant," recalls Holmes, then 38. "Michael never said a word. But when I was done he said, 'I want you to do a pilot right away for a show about it.' I said, 'Are you nuts? I'm a contractor, not a TV guy.' But I thought about it and, three months later, we shot our first show."

Ten years and hundreds of episodes later, Holmes is an international celebrity and a Canadian icon of integrity and professional workmanship. Launched to stardom with *Holmes on Homes*, which ran for seven seasons and recently ranked among the 25 most popular Canadian TV shows in the past quarter century (up there with the likes of *Trailer Park Boys*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and *Mr. Dressup*), Holmes has translated his name and fame into a one-man entertainment empire with a humanitarian mission.

President of the Holmes Group, a multimedia production company that makes and sells everything from TV shows, books and newspaper columns to DVDs, work wear and sundry items—all of them starring





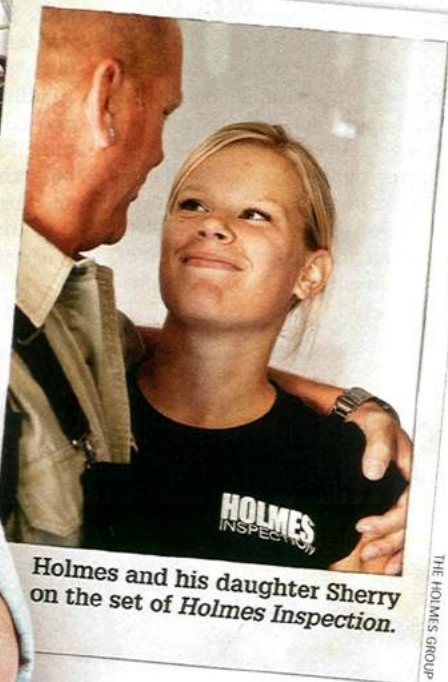
# Holmes on home renovation

With any renovation project, Mike Holmes suggests the following.

- 1. Slow down.** Don't rush into a renovation or you'll make bad decisions. You may need to wait for the right contractor.
- 2. Educate yourself.** Learn all you can about the materials and processes you'll be using in your renovation. What's involved? How long will it take?
- 3. Hire the right contractor.** Ask for references, and go see them. Check for a licence and insurance.
- 4. Get a permit.** This will make sure your job is safe and legal, and provide a record for the future sale of your home.
- 5. Stay involved in the project.** This is not the time to take a vacation and hope your home will be perfect when you return. It's your project—be the boss.



Holmes building a stud wall in a basement.



Holmes and his daughter Sherry on the set of *Holmes Inspection*.

Holmes stamped with his name and registered trademark motto, "Make It Right"—he is also a tireless promoter of the building trades and a passionate advocate for improved building standards and energy-efficient housing and communities.

Notably, Holmes' work with international charities such as SOS Children's Villages and national building- and youth-support groups such as Skills Canada has earned him recognition from the House of Commons as an "extraordinary craftsman [and] accomplished master builder with a social conscience."

Having a reputation as an honest contractor is an anomaly in an industry that ranked fourth in a 2010 *Reader's Digest* poll on the least trusted professions (behind telemarketers, car salesmen and politicians). It's also the likely reason Holmes finished second in the same poll on the people Canadians trust most (behind David Suzuki, but ahead of Michael J. Fox, Queen Elizabeth II and Lloyd Robertson, to name a few).

"When I stop to think about it," Holmes tells *The Connection* on the eve of a recent six-city tour in the United States to promote his latest publishing venture, *Holmes Magazine*, "I'm amazed at everything

that's happened to me over the past decade. Then again, I never get a chance to stop and think anymore. My life's a blur."

## Lending a hand

Not that Holmes is complaining—*au contraire*. In addition to his celebrity status, which makes him a big-name draw at public events, Holmes says he loves being able to restore the homes, and lives, of Canadian homeowners while offering tips to help other viewers the world over recognize, and hopefully avoid, the clutches of dishonest contractors. "This is the easiest business I know of where people can get screwed legally," Holmes says in his typically blunt manner. "And it's not just here in Canada; it's everywhere."

Helping and educating homeowners, he adds, was his primary goal from the moment he and a film crew walked into the first house to be featured on *Holmes on Homes*. It was a small bungalow in the working-class Toronto suburb of Scarborough, and the owners had given a contractor their life savings upfront for a complete home renovation. "Big mistake," says Holmes. "Halfway through the job the guy walked with their money and left them with what I call a 'whole house disaster.' Their life was a living nightmare."

Dressed in his now-familiar garb—dark brown overalls and a white muscle shirt that exposes his drain-pipe-size tattooed arms—Holmes, along with a crew of trusted tradesmen from his company, entered the house in white-knight fashion, ripping out the shoddy work and replacing it with quality materials and workmanship. The star, of course, was Holmes, who divided his time between comforting the homeowners and firing off bleated-out invectives against the crooked contractor with every hidden-behind-the-drywall problem he discovered—what he calls his "Holy \*\*\*\*!" moments.

"We did the job the way it should have been done the first time," he says.

## The foundation for a star

That was a mantra Holmes learned early in life from his late father, a plumber by trade and a technical engineer for General Motors who spent his spare time repairing and renovating the family's modest home near Broadview and Queen in Toronto's tough East End. "I was always beside him, watching, infatuated with his ability to change things—to take down walls or redo our house's plumbing," Holmes wrote in the introduction to



his first book, *Make It Right: Inside Home Renovation with Canada's Most Trusted Contractor*, which he dedicated to his father.

"He [my father] realized I wasn't going away, so he started to teach me," adds Holmes.

In what has become part of Mike Holmes lore, the precocious youngster started doing his own home renovation projects under his father's watchful eye. The first was a rewiring of the entire house when Holmes was only 6. After building go-karts, a trailer and a three-bedroom tree house, he did his first basement renovation job at age 12. "It was my uncle's house, and my dad knew I could do it," says Holmes. "I did the whole thing—the panelling, the stairs, the dropped ceiling, everything."

At 19, Holmes was hired to run a renovation company with 14 employees. A few years later, he started his own company and began building and doing major renovations in homes and businesses across the greater Toronto area. In addition to big jobs, such as the 1,672-square-metre (18,000-square-foot) showroom he built for a national furniture store, Holmes wowed his father with a \$52,000 bathroom he designed and completed. "I knew my father was proud of me," Holmes says. "It's a day I'll never forget."

#### Prime TV real estate

Over the years, Holmes developed both a passion for the building profession and abhorrence for the shoddy work done by so many contractors—jobs that often required

starting again from scratch, prompting Holmes to make up business cards that read, "The F-Up Fixer."

"I really got sick and tired of seeing all the crap work," he says. "For most contractors it's about how fast they can move, not the results."

Despite his belief that housing horror stories exist on every residential street, Holmes says he got few calls for help from homeowners during the first three seasons of *Holmes on Homes*. The trickle turned into a torrent in 2004, however, when the show started drawing some 250,000 viewers a week on HGTV and won a Viewers' Choice Gemini Award. "I started getting hundreds of e-mails a week from people pleading with me to visit their homes," recalled Holmes. "We were swamped almost overnight. And it's never stopped."

Media and marketing experts offer many reasons for the show's success, from Holmes' folksy manner and vein-popping outbursts to the huge upswing in consumer interest in real estate and do-it-yourself home renovation (DIY is a pet peeve of Holmes, who recommends hiring building professionals). "I think the biggest reason is that people need help buying or fixing their homes. And let's face it: Houses are the biggest thing most of us will ever buy in our lives. You have to protect that investment."

#### Built to last

Holmes took both the show and his star appeal to a new level in 2005 when he partnered with Peter Kettlewell to create the Holmes Group, which is dedicated to helping homeowners and raising building trade standards. "We were motivated by the desire to make sure the core integrity of this stayed true and didn't fall apart into mush," explains Quast, the company's vice president of business development.

In addition to marketing merchandise, such as DVDs of past episodes, the company has signed several endorsement deals. Notably, Holmes became—and remains—the Canadian pitchman for Nestlé, makers of his favourite brand of instant coffee. The company also runs a home inspection service, Mike Holmes Inspection, that offers home inspections by Holmes-approved inspectors in Calgary and across all of Ontario.

Holmes has also written four renovation-related books, a weekly newspaper column, a blog and the monthly *Holmes Magazine*, which was launched last year in an effort to counter "all the wrong information" that he says fills the pages of most

**"Houses are the biggest thing most of us will ever buy in our lives. You have to protect that investment."**

**—Mike Holmes**

## member profile

**Name:** Mike Holmes

**Member at:** Etobicoke, Ontario

**Website:** [www.makeitright.ca](http://www.makeitright.ca)

**Items at Costco:** Kitchens & Bathrooms (Collins Canada, 2010) and Attics & Basements (Collins Canada, 2011), by Mike Holmes

**Comment about Costco:**

"I love Costco so much I bring my truck every time I go there because I can't fit all the stuff I buy in the car."



renovation magazines. "Not bad for a guy who can't type, eh?" he quips.

Holmes has been quick to put his money where his self-described big mouth is. In 2006 he created the Holmes Foundation, a charity that works with schools, businesses and governments across Canada to raise the profile and reputation of the building trades and encourage kids to pursue careers in the multi-billion-dollar construction industry, which is facing a shortage of 1 million skilled workers. He is also helping to develop Wind Walk, a unique and eco-friendly community in rural Alberta that he hopes will set a new standard for housing construction and be a prototype for the future social and economic development of Native communities across Canada.

"Everybody talks about spending green and building green communities, but nobody's doing it," says Holmes. "So I decided years ago to do what I can on my own. I mean, if you have the opportunity to make a difference, why wouldn't you do that? For me it comes down to a simple equation: If you don't do it, who will? Helping and encouraging people to help themselves is an easy fit for me. It's what I'm all about."

Television, however, remains his primary focus. He has made or starred in a variety of shows, including a six-hour special he did with actor Brad Pitt in New Orleans to aid flood victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Since *Holmes on Homes* ended in 2007, Holmes has shot 52 episodes of *Holmes Inspection*, which does more in-depth investigations of home renovations gone bad. "It's like *Holmes on Homes* meets *CSI*," he says. "We use special effects and other cool things."

The shows, he adds, help to ground his hectic life by allowing him to spend time in the company of the many members of his building crew and production team, many of whom have been with him since the beginning. Holmes' three children—Amanda, Sherry and the baby, 21-year-old Mike Junior, who now weighs 90 kilos (200 pounds) and stands 1.92 metres (6-foot-3), making him 3 inches taller than his father—have also appeared on his shows. "Like my dad did with me, I've taught my kids well," says Holmes. "Sherry, in particular, is an absolute pro."

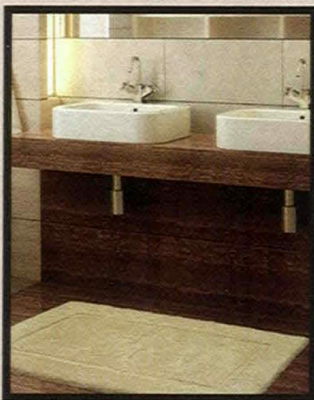
Divorced from his children's mother but now happily remarried to Anna, whom he calls "the only woman I know who's crazy enough to be with a guy who's never around," Holmes says he sometimes wishes he had more time to "just hang out" at his country home north of Toronto and to do more of the high-speed hobbies he enjoys, including snowmobiling and boating. "But then I read some of the e-mails I get from people whose lives have been wrecked by some unscrupulous builder," he says. "That always gets me going, makes me want to keep working to try and change things." [E]

Quebec City freelance journalist Mark Cardwell hammers words better than he does nails.

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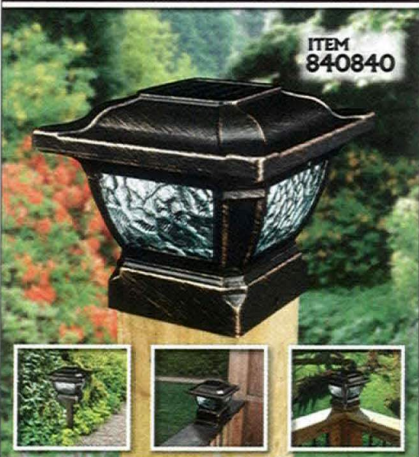
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