

Inspiring Australia's building professionals | NOVEMBER 2018

# HOUSING

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Story: Philip O'Brien

# award-winning skills

Business manager Susie Martin works with husband Aaron to make a difference in people's lives, as they build or extend their dream home.

It seems an unlikely career change. Susie Martin originally trained and worked as a physiotherapist but is now business manager with the family design and building firm, Aaron Martin Construction in Strathalbyn, South Australia. Yet many of the skills she developed in her previous career are now crucial in her new role.

Susie's accomplishments were recognised earlier this year when she won 2018 HIA Australian Business Partner of the Year. It's a significant award, acknowledging not only her achievements in the business but also the importance of similar positions, so often under-estimated, within the wider building industry.

'Sometimes there's a perception that wives who take on the business partner role just do the books,' she says, 'but there's so much that goes into running a business, in particular a building business, that the skill set required is extensive.'

Aaron Martin Construction is located in the picturesque town of Strathalbyn, on the Fleurieu Peninsula, some 50 kilometres south-east of Adelaide. Her husband Aaron has worked in the building industry for 20 years, first as a carpenter and now as a builder. Susie, meanwhile, chose

physiotherapy as a profession where she could help people achieve change in their lives, and be her own boss.

She began that career in a hospital setting, also completing a doctorate in aged care and a post-graduate fellowship.

'To leave this wasn't a decision taken lightly,' she says. 'I had started to cement a fairly clear career path in clinical and research physiotherapy when I went on my first period of maternity leave.'

But, gradually, the focus of the family business changed. 'At first, my role was limited to bookkeeping and a bit of marketing,' she recalls.

## When we built our own house in 2010, we realised we worked really well as a team

'Then, when we built our own house in 2010, we realised we worked really well as a team. So, during my second period of maternity leave in 2015, we decided to rebrand with a focus on custom-built new homes and I became business manager.'

Susie is responsible for the pre-construction phase of the building process.

'WE BUILD HOMES THAT WILL NOT ONLY LOOK GOOD BUT STILL BE STANDING IN 50 YEARS'

PEOPLE • SUSIE MARTIN



A RECENT EXTENSION ON A HOME NESTLED IN A VINEYARD



'From the initial inquiry, we send out a questionnaire to potential clients and, if we decide to proceed, have an initial meeting with the client. Then we move into the design phase where I liaise with the draughtsmen and prepare a cost analysis. After that, I'm involved in the approval process right through to the final price. Aaron takes over when we start construction but I also do client liaison throughout that phase.'

It's a role she relishes.

'Compared to working for a large organisation, if we decide that we want to make a change then we can just do it,' she says. 'I love the fact that we're in complete control of what we do.'

What's more, she juggles all of this with the responsibilities of being a mother of three young children.

'It is a challenge,' she agrees. 'I have three days a week of official child care, Aaron looks after the children on Tuesday mornings to give me more time in the office and I work at night. But we have a clear idea of where we are headed as a business and a strategy to manage the load.'

In fact, the development of systems and strategies is one of the skills that Susie developed

during her academic studies. 'I enjoy all of this, from the sales process to design to handover to 90 day review processes. One of my strengths is in constantly reviewing the way we do things, in improving efficiency and the client experience.'

She and Aaron have a strong attachment to the Strathalbyn region.

'We couldn't pick a better location and strive to ensure that the homes we build enhance the beauty of the local landscape and will continue to do so for many years to come.'

It's a popular region of South Australia, with many commuters to Adelaide, and land developments opening up. In Strathalbyn, especially, land is very affordable, she says.

'This means that people are building on bigger parcels of land. So we can design and orient houses for maximum energy efficiency.'

As such, sustainability is critical, she says. 'We build homes that will not only look good but still be standing in 50 years' time. We limit the number of builds we take on each year so that we can personally be involved in every aspect of the process.'

Their portfolio includes some renovations and extensions, including a recent one-room >



SUSIE'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS WERE RECOGNISED WHEN SHE WON 2018 HIA AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS PARTNER OF THE YEAR

'I'M PLEASED TO BE ABLE TO USE SKILLS FROM MY PREVIOUS CAREER TO ACHIEVE A SIMILAR OUTCOME – MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN PEOPLE'S LIVES'

L-R: Susie Martin, Shane Metcalfe (carpenter), Joe Slattery (apprentice) and Aaron Martin.



PEOPLE • SUSIE MARTIN



Susie also uses marketing as a means of differentiating the business from its competitors.

'We seek to create a community who can follow what we are doing, including on social media. In running a business you can get bogged down in the day-to-day grind of paperwork so this creates a buzz and keeps us sharp and creative.'

**'To have our work validated by the industry like this blew us away'**

extension on a home nestled in a vineyard at nearby Langhorne Creek. And they also build at least one 'spec' home each year as a showcase for their design and construction and to test new suppliers, products and sub-contractors.

Aaron Martin Construction employs three full-time carpenters as well as a team of 25 subcontracted tradesmen. Susie plays an important coordinating role in staff relations.

'We strive to make our staff feel valued,' she says. 'We supply uniforms, a work vehicle, provide rostered days off and professional development as well as display information and a photo of each of our staff on the website. We also employ one apprentice and aim to continue to offer apprenticeships in the future.'

She and Aaron are keen users of HIA member services including legal advice and web-based seminars. And her HIA national award, as Business Partner of the Year, came both as a surprise and a delight.

'To have our work validated by the industry like this blew us away,' she says.

'Building and renovation are a huge financial investment for clients but also a very emotional experience. I'm pleased to be able to use skills from my previous career to achieve a similar outcome – making a difference in people's lives.'

[www.aaronmartinconstruction.com.au](http://www.aaronmartinconstruction.com.au) 