

# CHAMPLAIN HARDWOODS PROVES QUALITY SERVICE STILL EXISTS

BY TERRY MILLER

**E**sex Junction, Vt.—

The energy level in the office is high, and Dave Williams is doing what he loves.

His passion for the lumber business is obvious and is the building block for what has become a uniquely small and successful company with an unrivaled reputation for outstanding quality and service. After 22 years at the helm of Champlain Hardwoods, Dave Williams continues to study the intricacies of business relationships. He has built a company that finds success through teamwork, discipline, integrity – and sometimes even a well-timed punch line.

“When we do business at Champlain Hardwoods, we consider everyone’s needs – most importantly those of our suppliers and customers. Treating people the way we want to be treated creates mutual respect,” Williams said. “Self discipline and work ethic are big parts of our code of behavior, but at the same time, we like to joke with people and have a sense of humor. It’s so critical to enjoy the day. Employees, customers, and vendors do better, work harder and last longer if they’re having fun. Lightheartedness creates energy.”

According to Chris Castano, vice president, Williams doesn’t just give this lip service. “Dave has an uncanny ability to walk in the other guy’s shoes,” Castano said and recalled an incident from his earliest days at Champlain Hardwoods. “I was 24 years old. I’d worked for the company exactly one week, and I was on my first road trip for Champlain Hardwoods. Through absolutely no fault of my own, I totaled my brand new company car. Calling the office to explain what had just happened was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. Instead of firing me, Dave laughed and said, ‘This is going to make a great story someday!’”



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The dedicated staff at Champlain Hardwoods shares Williams’ values.

“We have a great time trading lumber,” Castano said, “but at the same time, we’re very aware of the demands on mills and customers. We go out of our way to make life a little easier for them.”

## **The Foundation of Client Service: A Top Quality Team**

With the support of his wife, Linda, Williams founded Champlain Hardwoods in 1982. In its early years, the staff included Dave, Linda and a secretary.

“I would trade lumber during the day and fill out the customs papers at night,” Williams recalled. Today, he leads a closely knit seven-member team.

“I now have a skilled staff that handles the majority of our administrative affairs. It’s really a team of managers. Everyone in the company takes responsibility for their own performance, and each person contributes in an important way. None of us would be as successful as we are without the efforts of the team,” he said.

Castano, a University of Vermont graduate with a degree in forestry, joined Champlain Hardwoods in 1986 to augment the company’s sales efforts.

“Chris is an experienced trader who really adds strength to Champlain Hardwoods,” Williams said. “We’ve worked together for almost two decades now, and I have nothing but respect for the way he does business and the way he

represents the company. He’s a great lumber trader, and a lot of what we do is based on his planning and decision making.”

Fellow trader, Loren Voyer, joined the company in 2000. Also a UVM Forestry alumni, Voyer has been instrumental in implementing the company’s FSC program and is responsible for the procurement of FSC products.

“Loren is a can-do guy,” Williams said. “He has a fantastic attitude. He works hard. He’s respectful



Dave and Linda Williams founded Champlain Hardwoods in 1982. Loren Voyer, sales representative, has been instrumental in implementing the company's FSC program.

have resulted in client service that is unparalleled. While many offices can be tied up with rigid guidelines and procedures, the staff at Champlain Hardwoods is focused on one thing – serving its customers. Williams does not hesitate to recognize the contributions of this group.

“The administrative staff manages a tremendous body of ever-changing information. We bend over backwards to meet the needs of our customers, and this flexibility is sometimes challenging from a logistic point of view,” he said. “I can always count on the front office to put people before policy and make things happen.”

#### **The Second Piece of the Puzzle: A Healthy Inventory**

While customers certainly enjoy the professional relationships and friendships they've formed with Champlain Hardwoods, great client service alone isn't enough to bring customers back again and again. There is a second, equally important variable to the equation – the product. Customers buy from Champlain Hardwoods with confidence, knowing that if there is a problem with their lumber, Williams, Castano or Voyer will be on the road at the crack of dawn to personally tend to it.

Champlain Hardwoods offers green and kiln-dried, domestic Northern and Appalachian Hardwoods, including Red and White Oak, Hard and Soft Maple, Ash, Birch, Hickory, Basswood, Cherry, and furniture grade and D & better eastern white pine. A substantial inventory of dry lumber is kept at two locations in Vermont: St. Johnsbury and Brattleboro. Most of the inventory is 4/4 through 8/4 in No.2 and better grades.

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and inquisitive. Loren is the type of guy who will step up to the plate anytime we need him for anything. He fits in nicely with the team.”

While Williams, Castano, and Voyer's trading efforts are an important part of Champlain Hardwoods' success, the team behind them does not go unnoticed. Williams stresses that every member of the Champlain Hardwoods crew is equally responsible for the company's reputation. Rachell Hergenrother, an experienced systems manager, is starting her 10<sup>th</sup> year with the company. She handles inventory control, helps with shipping, and backs up the sales team.

Castano noted, “Rachell understands the whole process very well and really makes things go smoothly for us.”

Carmen Sanville has also been with the company for almost ten years and manages the accounts payable and receivable. She does all the invoicing and, according to Williams, has an impressive attention for detail and accuracy.

When customers call up, they are greeted by Gail Greer. As the receptionist and administrative assistant, Greer comes to Champlain Hardwoods with several years of business experience, a wonderful attitude and a great sense of humor, something that seems to be the standard in the office.

Williams' wife, Linda, has seen the company evolve over time, having been involved from the beginning. Aside from handling the accounting, she is the traffic coordinator, does the desktop publishing, and, according to the folks around the office, “keeps Dave in line.”

The Champlain Hardwoods' teamwork and culture

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*Dave Williams of Essex Junction, Vt. – based Champlain Hardwoods*



Gail Greer is receptionist and administrative assistant at the Essex Junction, Vt.-based company.




Chris Castano, vice president of the firm, is an experienced trader who has worked with Williams for almost two decades.



Rachell Hergenrother, a 10-year veteran at Champlain, is the systems manager and Carmen Sanville, also a 10-year employee, manages accounts payable and receivable.

# CHAMPLAIN HARDWOODS



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is kept at two locations in Vermont: St. Johnsbury and Brattleboro. Most of the inventory is 4/4 through 8/4 in No.2 and better grades.

There is also a large volume of Cherry from New England, New York and Pennsylvania, as well as Birch from Quebec and New England.

"We stock a healthy inventory of all the major species we deal with," Castano said. "This allows us to control the product and its quality, plus we can ship mixed loads."

Champlain Hardwoods takes an inventory position for its long-term customers, an example of its commitment to its clients.

"When we have a customer with a consistent need for material, we stock it for them," Voyer said. "Hard Maple in this area is very white in color and extremely dense. The Red Oak in New England tends to have tighter growth rings and great color. So we have an exceptional product to offer. We also handle a lot of Ash, unselected for color, which in our area has a firm texture. We refer to this as 'Tough White Ash.'"

### **A Strong Industry Presence**

Champlain Hardwoods doesn't let the expertise its people have accumulated over the years rest solely within the confines of its office. Rather, the company plays an active role in industry affairs. Williams is a board member of the National Hardwood Lumber Assoc. and a past board member of the Canadian Lumbermen's Assoc. In addition, Castano is the executive director of the New England Lumbermen's Assoc.

Champlain Hardwoods maintains active memberships in the Wood Product Manufacturers Assoc., The Vermont Forest Products Assoc., The Hardwood Forest Foundation, The Penn-York Lumbermen's Club, Vermont Project Learning Tree, and the Center for Woodlands Education. Castano has commented that meeting this responsibility to the industry at large has been both interesting and rewarding.

### **Key to Success: Partnering With Customers**

In the current corporate world, many companies seem to be seeking rapid growth to exploit the higher profits that can come from thousands of low-attention customer relationships. It is refreshing to see companies like Champlain Hardwoods that are focused first on doing the best they can for each and every customer and second on growth.

"We try to learn about what our trading partners do and how they do it. We want to make trades with them that will work with their processes. To do this, we need to listen carefully to what they have to say, and we need to ask a lot of questions," Castano said.

"I think we've found a good balance," Williams added. "We're big enough to be able to provide an outstanding product and service, but small enough so that we still have a heart. Many of our best friends are our customers and suppliers, and their needs come first. We have devoted a big part of our lives to trading lumber and really enjoy the people in the industry. We're happy that so many have trust in us and depend on our services to help make their companies run successfully."

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