





# In Living Couto

(pronounced coo-toe | \ 'kü-tō)

Words by **Melissa McGavock** | Photography by **Killingsworth Photography**

## FATHER AND SON BUILD BEAUTIFUL HOMES ONE OPPORTUNITY AT A TIME

**O**ppportunity knocks and you have to take it. However, for the American Dream, there is no fast lane to success. There's bumps, obstacles, sweat, sometimes blood, definitely tears and at the end of the day, few make it big. In most cases, those that have met success do so because the work is real, the jobs are real, the sacrifice is real, the hours are real long, and the sense of fulfillment is not usually what they expected.

In 1983, Al Couto transitioned from concrete work to building houses in the suburbs of Long Island, New York. For years, he'd worked from and studied the blueprints always laying around the jobsite. Having acquired a solid understanding of homebuilding, Al decided to open Couto and Sons Construction. Just a few years later, the economy took a turn and he was motivated to return to concrete.

In 1991, Donny Couto, age 12, was sent to Portugal to live with his grandmother following his parents' divorce. Together they raised pigs and sold them for auction at the fair. This was a pivotal, also humbling time in Donny's life, one that seems to have heavily influenced him. The nearest town to them, Caldas da Rainha, was not unlike our nearby Mineral Wells. Maybe more picturesque, literally translated it is the "Spas of the Queen," named for the natural, unpleasant smelling

water that had healing powers.

Forward type thinking is prevalent in Portuguese culture. Located on the Iberian Peninsula in Southwestern Europe, Portugal has no shortage of brilliant views and natural surroundings that inspire passion, fearlessness, and great minds. As well, much of the art and architecture is influenced by the scenery, particularly agricultural and maritime elements.

Close by Caldas da Rainha, in a parish called Cabreiros, Donny's experience was at times very difficult. For months, he and his grandmother had no running water. They retrieved water in blue buckets from a well and his grandmother boiled it for bathing and drinking. Everyday actions we sometimes take for granted were challenging, just using the restroom was a production. It was during this time in Donny's life that he gained perspective on some of life's beautiful, and sometimes brutal truths. He began to gain a sense of identity here. This experience shaped the man he was going to be.

Al Couto, also raised in Portugal, endured even more hardships than his son. However insurmountable, together and on their own, both men have emerged as successful entrepreneurs in Granbury, Texas.



At age 16, Donny moved back to America, to New York, with a chip on his shoulder. He couldn't seem to find his place or get along with anyone. Wrought with teenage angst and pride that presented as anger, he moved around quite a bit, living with various family members.

With little resolution in sight, an opportunity to start over came to Donny. He had an uncle that married a woman from Dublin, Texas. Just one year back in the States, Donny decided to move to Texas on his own. He enrolled himself in nearby Hico High School and rented a small home. Quickly,

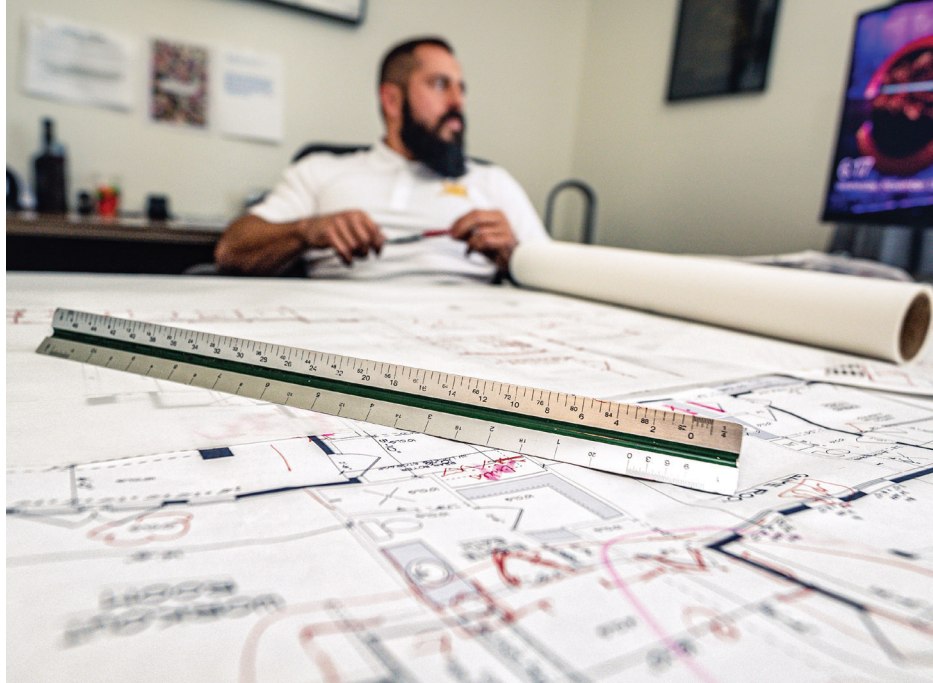
Donny got licensed to install septic systems, and in addition to some side jobs doing dirt work, he supported himself and graduated class of 1998.

Following graduation, Donny tried a year at Tarleton, he also chased work. He frequently traveled back to New York working construction with his Dad. He recalls the experience as awful, he hated it. The work was very hard and he had to answer to builders constantly barking orders. He sold his apartment and his truck and moved back

to Texas to start a family with his Hico sweetheart and become a homebuilder.

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QUALITY SERVICE, AT THE  
BEST VALUE.**





With the sale of his belongings and his apartment, he believed he had put together enough money to build his first spec home. Working full time at Somervell Floors making \$80 a day, in 2001 Donny started Four Seasons Homes. For \$12,000 he purchased a property off Knob Hill near Highway 144 and started construction. His first house took him one year to build and in the end he was \$10,000 short. For the first time ever, Donny asked his Dad for financial help. The first check he wrote upon the sale of the home was to Al Couto. Donny still made \$7,000 off the sale and was not discouraged.

His third year in homebuilding he was still working at the tile store, but started to gain momentum, and made a little money. Local resident, Cindy Hammonds, walked one of his houses in Stoney Creek. She admired it so much she contracted Donny to build her home in Pecan Plantation. This home was yet another hard learning moment for Donny. He confidently quoted her at \$220K. The home ended up costing Donny \$260K to finish. \$40,000 in the hole, he was out of options,

out of time and concluded that he may need to stop building for good. He knew he had to honor his bid to Cindy Hammonds, at the same time he refused to claim bankruptcy. He would not go back on his word, and he always paid his debts, a lesson he learned from his father. He went to his mother for help and it took him nearly seven years to pay her back.

Soon after, another opportunity knocked. It was an investor from California. He had heard of Donny's work and was interested in partnering. Four Seasons Homes steadily made its mark over the next five years until 2009 when the recession hit and investors pulled out.

Meanwhile, in 2008, Al Couto made the move to Granbury, the burgeoning community where his son had experienced success in homebuilding. He started ANS Homes and began building in Mallard Point almost immediately.

Facing the 2009 recession and Donny's investors pulling out, the Couto family was once again facing adversity due to the nature of owning a business.





## "THE VALUE THE BUILDER BRINGS IS CONNECTING THE PIECES." - DONNY COUTO



Donny's wife, with her degree in education, quickly found work as a teacher with Granbury ISD. Donny reflected on this time in his career and his marriage, "I applied for unemployment for the first time in my life. I walked in embarrassed, hoping not to see anyone I knew. Another builder was there, dressed to the tens, but had the same look of shame. We acknowledged one another, however avoided each other the rest of the day. During the following six months of unemployment and a few side jobs installing tile for cash, my wife and I made it work and it was the strongest our marriage had ever been."

Opportunity knocked again, the developer of Abe's Landing picked up The Island and Catalina Bay. He approached Donny for a partnership. The phone continued to ring and this was a mutually beneficial relationship for years. Al and Donny Couto finally decided to join forces in the Spring of 2010. Al's strength was negotiation and vendor relations. Donny's was creativity, functional design and client interaction. They officed out of Al's home and hired their first full-time employee, Margie, who still works for Donny at the 377 location.

The last ten years have been exciting and challenging for the family. Al and Donny decided it was best to split ways in 2014 as they differed ideologically. Al's sweet spot is spec homes and Donny's is custom builds. It made sense for their business and following a year of adjustment (and Margie as their counselor and confidant), it was healthy for their relationship, too. They made a gentleman's agreement to not compete and to respect one another on price point. They agree that it was the right decision. Family dinners are easier. Al and Donny meet regularly to have a meal together and talk often. Donny smiled and said, "Dad is funny, his humor is infectious."

In 2010, Al and Donny built eight homes. At the close of this year, Al and Donny will have completed 139 homes. Despite times without paychecks and late evenings at the office, they've both succeeded in establishing their businesses together and apart. Al Couto Homes is steady and successful. Al is able to manage his work well and has plenty of time to travel in his RV.

Couto Homes has grown exponentially. They have





taken a stronghold in Fort Worth, Aledo, Benbrook, Burleson, Mansfield, Midlothian and surrounding areas. Donny has made a concerted effort to invest in modern business practices, ways to improve the customer experience and to make the emotional process easier. Couto Homes has been nationally recognized with the “Best in American Living” awarded by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). As well, they’ve received 12 Star Awards from the Texas Association of Builders which showcase the outstanding work of the state’s home builders, remodelers, and architects. Donny has been invited to speak at the NAHB International Builders Show in Las Vegas in January 2020 about his software integration for customizing floorplans.

However, Donny has taken a step back. He explains, “..emotionally, you give your customers everything. Once you’ve hit bottom, you do everything you can to not experience that again.” In 2018, Donny hired Wes Thompson to run Couto Homes. Together with his team, Couto Homes is continuing to fine tune their business processes, they are focused, and working to understand

their own identity better, to shape it and protect it.

Today, including children and spouses, there are more than a dozen Coutos living in Granbury including his brother Ryan, cousins Joey (son of the uncle in Dublin), Jason and Alden. From land acquisition to operations, drafting and engineering, this is a family that is hard-working and talented. And Granbury doesn’t seem too far removed from life in Portugal; the small hometown feel, the naturally beautiful surroundings and even the cow pastures are reminiscent of their roots. Also, the fine detail and architectural features that are the cornerstone of Couto Homes reflect those formative years Donny spent with his grandmother in Portugal.

Becoming who we are going to be rarely goes as we predicted. Even the idea of what success means to us changes. It is the courage to keep going that is the measure of our progress. The Couto family has proven themselves to be masters of their field, and not without sweat, tears, and forgiveness. We’re looking forward to what’s next for this family and their footprint for generations moving forward. 