

# Larry Sietsma & Sandi Sietsma Forest

## Keeping the Dream Alive

BY JOYCE WILDEN

Larry Sietsma came out of retirement for one reason: to build affordable homes for young families. So, paired with a new sidekick, the retired airline and former Marine Corps fighter pilot started Avtec Homes in the fall of 2006.

There was only one problem. The housing market was starting to nosedive.

"Everyone told me the timing was wrong for another home building company," the lanky, 69-year-old said. "But I knew my daughter and I could make it work. There was a shortage of homes affordable enough for young people. And I've done this before."

Indeed he has.

Sietsma, who founded Holiday Builders in 1983, sold the company to his employees after 16 years, and settled into a retirement in which he and wife Sherry indulged their travel bugs by circumnavigating the globe in their Beechcraft Baron.

But after a few years, something still was missing, so Sietsma started to think about a new company that would cater exclusively to first-time home buyers.

He wanted not only to make a difference in the lives of young families, but to leave a legacy for his daughter.

Sandi Sietsma Forest, a graduate of the University of Florida and Florida Tech, grew up listening to construction "shop talk" from her builder father and was working as a commercial real estate appraiser when Larry suggested they start a company together.

"Helping first-time homebuyers was always my Dad's passion," she said. "He wanted me to experience it, to feel what it's like to hand over the keys to a young family. Now I know that building someone's first home is the best profession there is."



Forest learned the business quickly and now helps run every aspect of the 16-person company, which has had remarkable success – last year, Avtec filed 93 building permits in Palm Bay, more than any other builder, including the big names that came to town during the boom years.

The feat is remarkable considering Avtec's business week: it is closed on Sundays, traditionally a big day for house shoppers.

Like her father, Forest believes the market has a message.

"The reason we are so successful is because people need our 'Citation'," she said, referring to the company's first and best-selling floor plan. "Every home we built in 2007 was a Citation for first-time buyers only."

At a modest 1,256 square feet, the three-bedroom Citation costs \$114,900, which includes a prepared lot in Palm Bay.

But growing families demanded something larger and others chafed under the "first-timers only" restriction, so Avtec complied, releasing a four-bedroom version of the Citation as well as the 2092 sq. ft. "Gulfstream."

With a pilot in the company cockpit, it's not surprising that Avtec homes are named after airplanes; the company's red and black logo even features an airplane and a looping vapor trail.

The tag line reads, "Where our children will live . . ."

The sentiment conveys Sietsma's passion for housing the next generation and doesn't surprise those who know him well, according to longtime acquaintances like Binki Kaiser.

"Where our children will live' is pure Larry," says Kaiser, a professional sales trainer and owner of Binki Kaiser Sales Management Solutions. "He's got such a big heart, especially for kids with their first home. Larry completely lives his personal values."

Avtec is quite personal: almost all its faces belong to former Holiday employees who gravitated to the company after Sietsma started it. They say they appreciate Sietsma's maxims: "Only hire nice people" and "Always pay your bills on time."

That may ensure a cohesive, friendly staff and a steady and loyal subcontractor base, but salesperson Dawn Rice says there's more to it.

"The heart of Avtec is inside this scrapbook" she said, opening a white binder filled with cards and letters. "You can judge a company by what its customers say, and these young people are ecstatic."

Rice doesn't believe that all builders engender the same goodwill enjoyed by Avtec and added that the company sometimes leaves other builders scratching their heads.

"We lowered the prices on our new homes when land prices dropped, but we also gave a Home Depot gift card to every customer who had bought at the old price. Honestly, who else does that?"

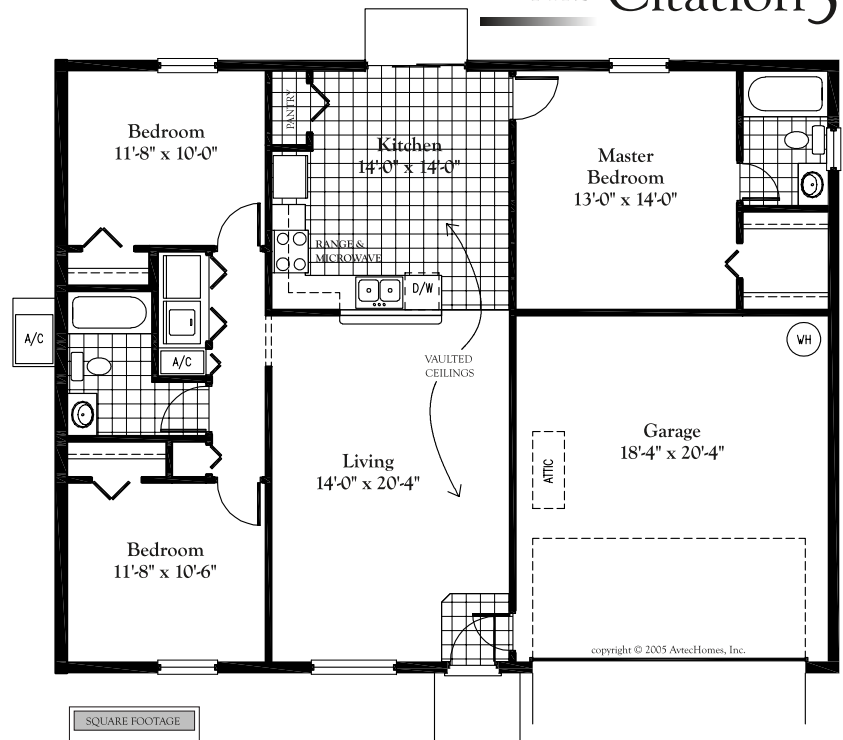
It has paid off, and Larry Sietsma and Sandi Forest opened a Port St. Lucie building division at the end of 2007 and will open a subdivision in Cocoa later this year. Meanwhile, model homes in Palm Bay are humming with traffic, as is the AvtecHomes.com website.

Like the airplane in the company logo, the new product offerings are taking off.

"Life is good," Sietsma says.

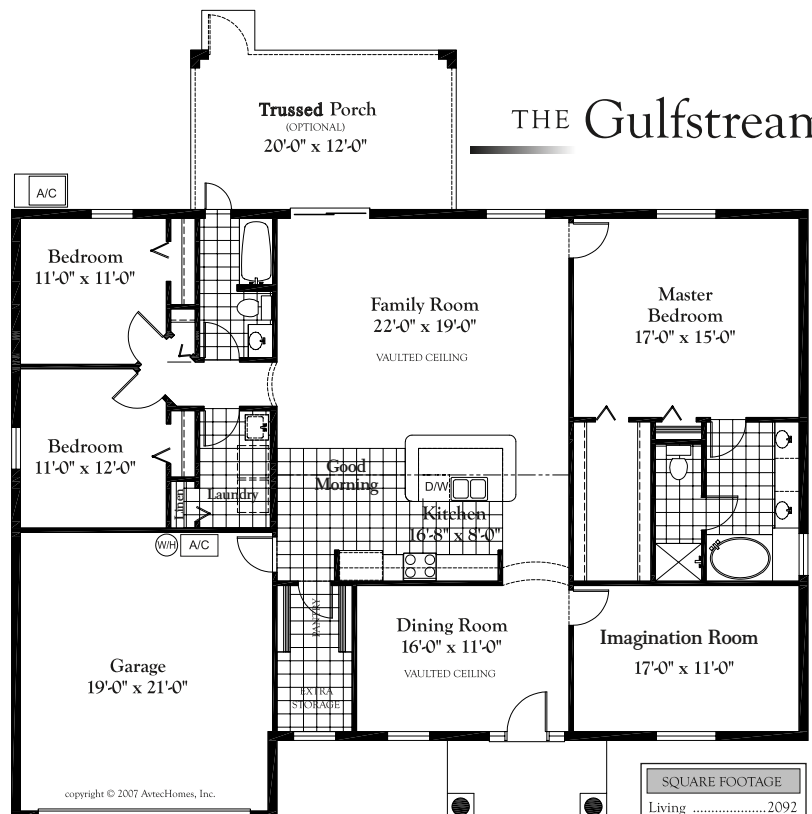
SHOWN BELOW ARE  
TWO OF THE FLOORPLANS CURRENTLY OFFERED  
BY AVTEC HOMES

THE Citation 3



SQUARE FOOTAGE	
Living .....	1256
Garage .....	400
TOTAL .....	1656

THE Gulfstream



SQUARE FOOTAGE	
Living .....	2092
Garage .....	428
Front Entry .....	72
Trussed Porch .....	240
TOTAL .....	2832