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Contractor living a custom-built lifestyle

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Have it your way.

If you are Don Hughes' client, that's what he wants you to know as he creates your dream home.

If you are Hughes, it's a credo for life.

Hughes has custom built his lifestyle. He loves South Tampa but hates commuting on its busier roads. So he lives on Davis Islands. His office and nearly all his construction projects are on the island, too.

The backyard centerpiece of his \$2.8-million waterfront home is a pool inspired by a favorite destination, the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas. The columns inside his 7,000-square-foot house revive those from a scene in his favorite movie, Casablanca.

Hughes specializes in such whims. Lavishly detailed Mediterranean revival architecture and custom wine rooms are expected in the homes he builds, which average about \$4-million each.

He recently completed a \$5.2-million house a few blocks away from his own. It was bought in March by local McDonald's franchise executive Blake J. Casper. Hughes plans another Davis Islands manse that he says will likely sell for about \$6-million.

Before Hughes started building on Davis Islands about five years ago, "it was a foreign country to me," he said. "Just a bunch of squiggly streets." Now it's hard to get him off the island.

Putting nearly all his eggs in a basket that's vulnerable to storm flooding doesn't bother him either. Besides being a government-mandated 11 feet above mean sea level, his house, like all the others he builds, is Mediterranean revival styled. That means no wood frame or siding. If a big storm swamps Davis Islands, "I won't lose much ..." Hughes said. "I'll come out better than some houses miles inland."

Nonchalance is part of Hughes' trade in stock. His quips slip out with such ease that you almost miss them. When asked how the last two hurricane seasons have changed his building practices, he replied they have "caused us to speed up."

He's not much of a handyman, and the irony of that isn't lost on him. "I don't have a pickup truck, because people would say I need to have tools in it," he said. "Then people would say I need to use them."

A Valdosta, Ga., native, Hughes moved with his family to Tampa when he was 9. After attending Mitchell Elementary, Wilson Middle School and Plant High, he earned a degree in building science from the University of Florida in 1977.

Hughes worked for construction companies in Orlando and Saudi Arabia before returning to Tampa to start his company in 1985. At the time he lived in a small apartment on Swann Avenue. Now he bemusedly remarks on how the 800-square-foot guest cabana in his back yard is nicer than any place he lived in until well into his 30s.

Hughes knows how to keep things simple. There are only two others on his company's payroll, a superintendent and

office administrator. The rest of the work is done by a short roster of familiar subcontractors.

Carpenter Carl Darrigo played Little League baseball with Hughes in the early '60s. He said Hughes' basic personality hasn't changed much. "He always had that intelligent type of feel about him," Darrigo said. "You might as well walk behind him, because he's not going to let you get ahead of him."

But Darrigo is happy to follow his old friend. "He's the only contractor I work for. He always has the same set of subcontractors. We're all friends. It's like a giant family."

"I don't hunt, golf or fish," Hughes said as he showed off his collection of Spanish flamenco guitars. Mastering the instruments is his chief hobby.

He's also more likely to fiddle with the lush landscaping that surrounds his pool, which is fed by a miniature running creek and waterfall, than tinker with tools.

There is one home he's developing off the island, a family getaway in Exuma, Bahamas. That will join the mountain log cabin the Hugheses have in Hayesville, N.C. "Not that I need places," Hughes said. "They're good investments."

AGE: 52

PROFESSION: Owner of Donald C. Hughes General Contractor Inc.

FAMILY: Wife, Mary Kay; son Erik, 13; daughters Jordan, 11, and Madison, 5

VEHICLES: Cadillac Escalade, Piper Saratoga plane, 29-foot Twin Vee catamaran, Sea-Doo TX 4-Tec personal watercraft

HOBBIES: Flamenco guitar. He owns "at least six" flamenco-style guitars

FAVORITE FLAMENCO GUITARIST: Juan Martin

PET PEEVES: "People that don't care about their workmanship."

MOTTO: "No crybabies."

[Illustration]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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