

FEBRUARY 2023

Highland Park

NEIGHBORS

Tom Decker
Owns a Green Company
That is Changing
Lives and Impacting
Communities



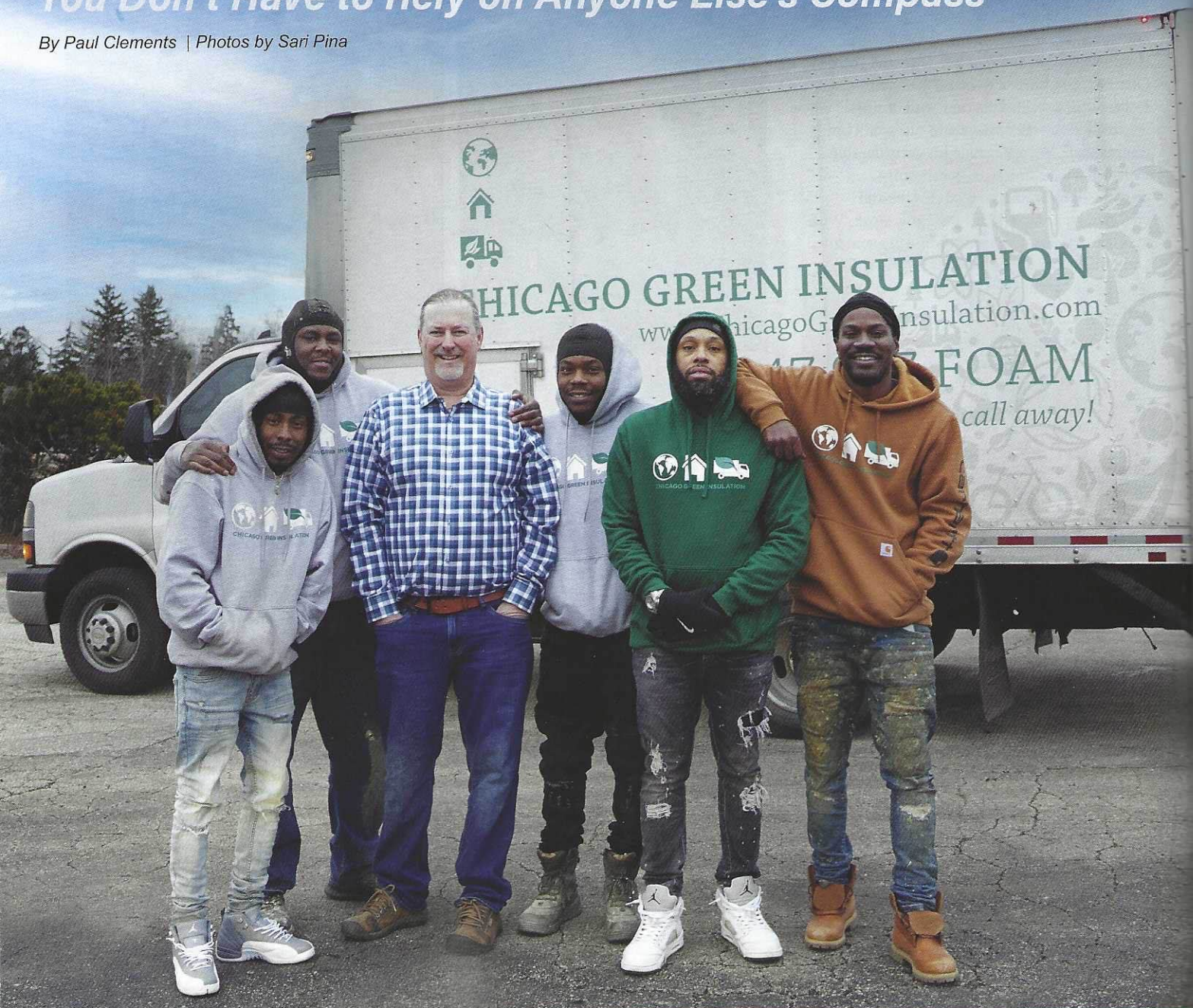
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Photos by Sari Pina

Tom Decker:

"When You Can Understand What Your True North Is, You Don't Have to Rely on Anyone Else's Compass"

By Paul Clements | Photos by Sari Pina



Local businessman Tom Decker is the owner of Chicago Green Insulation, the Chicago area's top-rated spray foam installer. His company is on a mission to not just battle carbon emissions one structure or rehab at a time, but also to truly level the scales of our justice system by rehabbing and renewing people who have been incarcerated, so that they can be gainfully employed contributors to a better society and ultimately to give them the opportunity to become homeowners where they can have something of value to pass down to their children for the first time in generations.

Tom married Dana Kay on July 15, 2006 on the hottest day of that summer at the garden overlooking Ravine Beach. In July of 2009, Tom and Dana moved back to Highland Park, where Dana was raised and

graduated from HPHS in 1991. They have two kids, Eli and Madeline and a sweet rescue dog Scarlet Fire.

According to Decker, spray foam insulation works as a combination of an air barrier and insulation that will keep your space comfortable 24/7 with a minimum cost from the utility companies. It acts like a high-performance thermal envelope that increases comfort and reduces energy costs by eliminating air leakage between your structure and the outside elements and in certain installs can increase the structural integrity by as much as 200%.

Decker says, "we are a spray foam insulation business that has served the Chicago metropolitan area for 14 years. We work on homes and businesses that are under construction, applying polyurethane foam so

that we can reduce the month-over-month cost of heating and cooling, and increase the comfort of the space. We hire formerly incarcerated people and people impacted by the justice system. So, not everyone who works on a job site has served time, but every single one of them has in some way, shape or form been impacted by the justice system.”

Just as the right spray foam offers an added layer of protection, Decker himself is a man of many layers. Not like an onion that you peel back to get to the center of its essence, but rather a person who wears his heart on his sleeve, but as you get to know him, you are continually surprised by how he reflects his experiences in ways that are natural, but unexpected.



Tom and Dana

He has seemingly stepped right out of the Dale Carnegie book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He will walk across any room, no matter the event or setting, and introduce himself to anyone with his big smile and a firm handshake. He is more than adept at being a good listener, he makes the other person feel important – and he does it sincerely, exactly as his Father and Grandfather taught him so many years ago.

But don't let that mislead you. He is not an old-fashioned used car salesman, he is a man of action, spurred on by a deep sense of faith, made stronger when he converted to Judaism one week before Eli was born. When he called his old boss Bernie Kosberg to let him know he had converted, Bernie replied that “I knew you were Jewish before you knew you were Jewish.” Tom said, the reason he converted was not because it changed anything inside of him but he wanted to share the experience of being Jewish with his family. Rabbi Michelle Greenberg, who oversaw his conversion commented that “your commitment to Tikkun Olam or healing the world makes you well suited to share the joys and challenges of raising a Jewish family.” Tom is someone you can always count on, but he also is primarily motivated by his “true North” sense of what's right, so while he will gladly drop everything he is doing to help someone in need, his trust has to be earned, and his standards and work ethic must be lived up to.

Decker's life journey started some 756 miles from Highland Park, in Henryetta, OK, but his wanderlust provided him with ample opportunities to crisscross the country before settling on the North Shore. Henryetta, from a topographic and business perspective, is almost the exact opposite of Highland Park.

According to John Griner, Former Editor of the *The Oklahoman*, the local newspaper. When Hugh Henry wandered into the Creek Nation in 1885, he found coal in the creeks, marking the beginning of the town of Henryetta, Oklahoma.

Coal meant big business for the town. The coal attracted the railroad industry. Soon, several railroads arrived; and many mines were opened. The city turned into a melting pot of people coming to the area to mine coal. Miners came from such places as England and Italy and other parts of the country.

According to the Henryetta Chamber of Commerce, by 1913, Henryetta had 23 industrial plants including 12 coal mines, a broom factory, brick factories and a bottling plant.”

During the time Tom was growing up there 1966 and 1979, “For me, Henryetta was small enough that I could ride my bicycle anywhere in town. Walking home from school meant I walked past both grandparents' homes and could stop by either house for a treat, or conversation. I could find a group of guys to play baseball or football, stop by my best friend Jimmy Berry's fathers store that was both the local pharmacy and ice cream counter and order a dish of chocolate ice cream, it was right out of a story book if you were white.”

Henryetta was a community of some diversity until 1907 when a white mob accused a black man of a capital crime and sought revenge on him and then drove the rest of the town's black residents out of town making it an all white town for much of the century.

“When I was in school there, it was still a sundown town, so that meant its population was all white and it did not have a non-white person graduate from its high school until 1987. And, I did not understand a lot about what that meant when I was a kid. But it's come to impact a lot of how I've seen race and community the rest of my life. So, diversity is an interesting thing to understand and what I can say with clarity is that growing up in a town that had sundown laws, led me to wanting to be a part of a community that was more rich and diverse.”



A BOOMING Henryetta industry, Decker Foundry, is operated by Hoyt Decker (second from left), board chairman; Will Decker (right), president, John Decker (left) personnel director, and Colin Rae (second from right) operations director. The plant employs 32 persons with a payroll of \$365,000. (staff



Madeline and Eli with an Original Decker Manhole Cover

In a certain sense, Decker's parents were very much a part of their community. His Grandpa Hoyt along with Uncle John and his Father Will owned and operated Decker Foundry, at one time it was the largest employer in town, a company that forged manhole covers and drain grates, and his mother was a reporter for the town newspaper, *The Henryetta Freelance*.

Decker said, "my mom's favorite interview that she ever had was when the local gas station proprietor six blocks away called her and said Elvis is at the gas station gassing up if you can get here in two minutes. I can hold him that long to be able to get a photograph and you can talk to him for a second, which she did, and I have continually searched for that photograph and my hope is that one day I will find it.

Decker Foundry made manhole covers, curb inlets and drain grates. So, I am the only parent you will ever meet who has two teenage kids who will happily pose in front of a sanitary sewer lid, however, I don't think they actually know what's going on underneath that lid, but it has their family name on it. The closest Decker manhole cover is in Green Oaks, IL. When I was a kid, it was a \$6 million dollar a year business, manufacturing cast iron, and I was raised to run that business. But, back then, I didn't want to do that, and I used to curse at my father every time he would suggest it. But, my grandfather was the most persistent. He would grab me by the back of my neck, slap a clip-on tie on me and tell me to stand next to him during a meeting and listen. And, afterward, he would truly quiz me on it. Then, when I was 18 years old, my dad called me up and told me that I had gotten my wish, their loan had been called in and the bank was taking over the business. At that point, I was like wait a second, but my dad said I thought this is what you wanted, I realized that was only true until the moment that I couldn't. But it's impacted everything from 18 to 56. Because I learned as a child the beauty of the community that is a business."

Decker's father, Will, passed away last spring. In his obituary it says, "Will lived his life by his own rules, sharing his opinions with anyone who would listen and some who refused to listen. Will was a complicated man, with a good heart who will be missed!"

The family moved to Tulsa and Tom was accepted into the magnet school that was the only fully racially integrated school in the city. Booker T. Washington High School was the only building in Tulsa's Greenwood district to survive the 1921 Race Massacre. Tom cites his sophomore English literature class "Search for Identity," as the bridge from early pain to a deeper understanding of his obligation to build a better world. Tom recalls distinctly reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel, the peace and the drive from Elie Wiesel, how could I not embrace the same.

When he was only six years old, his godfather was the victim of a hate crime. Decker believes that at the core of this crime was someone who was drunk and angry. "If the guy had been home in bed, tired from a day's work, looking forward to another day's work, in a home filled with love and hope, instead of inebriated and angry, I believe that my godfather would be alive today."

"Business for me is something that I did not really aspire to," Decker said. "For me, it's really an evolution of a life experience of being the family member of a hate crime victim. I sat in that courtroom and watched the guy in the black robe with the scales of justice that are equally available to all and knew they were not equally available to all. My parents exposed me to the reality of prejudice and violence, but at the time, I don't think they really knew what was going to happen."

Decker began to find his footing the summer of his freshman year in college, when he worked at a United Jewish Appeal camp for kids from all backgrounds who have emotional and learning problems, including children on the autism spectrum in Rhinebeck, New York. The camp was a milieu therapy program where everyone helped everyone learn and grow and be safe.

Of this experience he recalls, "I accepted the challenge and I dove in headlong, and it truly impacted everything that I've done since, because it was there I built relationships with kids from extreme deprivation, kids with learning challenges, who really needed somebody to express an interest in them. Tom recalls one experience with a five year old African American girl, who had been rather difficult so her counselors asked Tom to spend time with her throughout her stay. "On the last day of camp, I made a point of being at her cabin as her mother arrived to pick her up. As her mother gathered her things, she was taking off the wall above the girl's bed several items, one of which was a drawing that she had done with me." The mother asked the girl about the drawing and she replied, "Mom, that's me in the drawing. That's me as a doctor, Tom told me that if I stayed in school and studied and worked hard, I could be a doctor." With a cold stare directly at me, the mother reached up on the wall and put her hand flat on the wall over the drawing and then closed her hand, wadding up the drawing and tossing it into the garbage and then turned toward me and said, "Tom lied, Doctors don't come from our neighborhood."

Ultimately, this experience put me in the position of writing dozens of recommendation letters for kids that worked for me. So many of them excelled in that work environment and so many of them struggled after to find jobs and careers. This experience and an understanding that he was a different kind of boss enriched his enthusiasm for hiring these same kinds of individuals and holding the bar high knowing that they could rise to the occasion.



Tom Taking His Case to Congress

Decker has given his time, talent and treasure to numerous causes. He currently serves in various roles for Community Partners for Affordable Housing, Curt's Cafe, Parks Foundation of Highland Park, Revolution Workshop, Highland Park Chamber of Commerce and Sustainable Options for Urban Living. Chicago Green Insulation also was the 2017 Employer of the Year for the Lake County Coalition to End Recidivism. Tom was recognized by the Highland Park Chamber of Commerce with the Community Builder award in 2020. Tom and his family are members at Aitz Hayim where they enjoy the relationships with other families who share their deep commitment to building a better world.

Amy Rosenfeld Kaufman, Director of Development and Community Relations for Community Partners for Affordable Housing, said, "Tom has been an invaluable member of CPAH's Advisory Board for many years. Not only is he kind and thoughtful, but he has a passion and commitment to the environment and to providing opportunities for the underserved. We are very grateful that he brings his considerable talents



Tom with Congressman Brad Schneider

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A photograph showing the interior of Heritage Trail Mercantile, featuring antique furniture, lamps, and decorative items.

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A photograph of a large, two-story white house with a red roof and multiple chimneys, surrounded by greenery.
A small inset photograph of a red brick house with white trim.

A logo for Divinci Painters featuring a stylized house shape with a rainbow-colored roof.

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and ingenuity to CPAH and affordable housing."

Jon Levey, President Highland Park Bank & Trust, a Wintrust community bank, "I've known Tom now for well over a decade going back to the beginning of the green/sustainable movement in Chicagoland when he and I would often be asked to speak at conferences or other events on topics of green building, finance and sustainable design. Tom is a passionate and effective leader and business innovator who gains his strength from a willingness to always be learning. It's been a pleasure watching him take his business and turn it into a social enterprise that seeks to offer pathways for those who have made missteps in their lives but deserve an opportunity to grow and learn from their mistakes while positively contributing to society. And, besides all of that, Tom is just a really super nice guy that I'm happy to call a friend."

This December, the Decker family took a road trip that included Graceland and some time on the beach in Florida, but on the drive from Memphis to Anna Maria Island, FL they stopped in Montgomery, AL at the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.



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Winding the halls of the museum from 1619 to the last exhibit, which includes video screens setup to look like you are visiting with an inmate, Madeline listened to one individual tell the story of his 40 years in prison from the age of 15. Madeline turns to Tom and says, "These are the people you hire dad!" "Yes honey, these are like the people I hire... None of us are defined by the worst moment of the worst day of our lives... not me, not you, not them!"

Tom scheduled his interview for this story at Curt's Cafe. After hearing so many great stories of service above self and community impact, far too numerous to include in the confines of a small publication like this one, he took his last sip of coffee and the last bite of his scone, and said, "there's probably a book that we can co-author someday. It would be the story of a crazy family that had to go through so much, and with a father who did many good things and many bad things. But the one thing that he taught me that I will be forever grateful for, is that when you can understand what your true north is, you don't have to rely on anyone else's compass."

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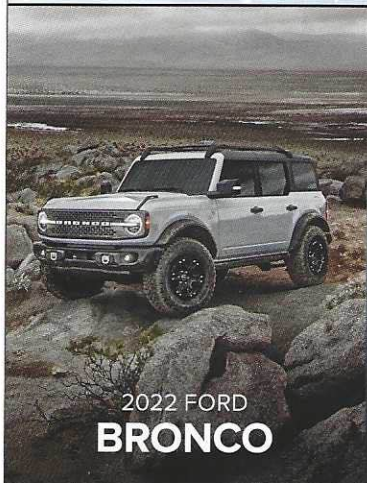
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