

EXECUTIVE

Chicagoland Edition

INSPECTOR FEATURE

Inspect the Unexpected

CornerStone Home Inspection Services Creates Sparks with Unrivaled Service and High-Tech Tools-of-the-Trade

By Kelly Tiebout

It's a home buyer's worst nightmare. Excited with the prospect of a new purchase, they wisely seek the expertise of a home inspector. Suddenly, their new home is filled with red flags. Agents today face a real dilemma, knowing the discovery of "deal-killers" like termites, mold or a leaky roof could easily cause buyers to retreat. Using the best home inspector may increase the likelihood that substantial problems will be revealed. However, with reputations to uphold, today's leading Realtors recommend inspectors they know will provide clients with full disclosure on the merits of their purchase. CornerStone Home Inspection Services, LLC consistently ranks at the top of the list with Chicagoland Realtors.

The company, created by Ronald Niego, also a career firefighter, has gained a reputation for honesty and quality that consistently outshines its competition. Growing up, Ron learned the ins and outs of residential construction from his father by helping out with the family-owned construction business. Ron's father started bringing him out to jobsites when he was just 7 years old. Ron's formal studies in construction safety engineering earned him a bachelor

Cornerstone headquarters located in the Edison Pak neighborhood on the Northwest side of Chicago.



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Ron with his talented and knowledgeable staff of inspectors: Nick Eaglin, Scott Fogarty and Kurt Harms.

of science degree from Illinois State University. After becoming a firefighter, and spending a year working for a competitor as a home inspector, Ron decided to branch out on his own, coached by his cousin Joe Niego of Niego Real Estate. Why do so many agents keep CornerStone on their phone's speed-dial? Most are impressed by the stellar service, unique personnel and impressive use of cutting-edge technology.

Clients rave about the team's expertise and reliability. Admitting his obsession with detail, Ron makes sure the team communicates every finding, while keeping problems in perspective. "We are not alarmists," said Ron, "but we also don't sugarcoat results." Marc Anderson from American Realty Services has referred CornerStone to over 100 buyers, and used them for five or six personal acquisitions. Anderson has seen his share of home inspectors that "exaggerate potential problems or defects, blowing them out of proportion to make themselves feel important." When amateur inspectors find asbestos, they may tell buyers they must remove and replace asbestos siding at great expense. In contrast, CornerStone's inspectors let clients know of techniques like encapsulating sprays and techniques that allow you to simply put new siding right



Ron and Marc Anderson of American Realty Services located on Northwest Highway in Edison Park.

over the old, eliminating the health scare. Anderson values how CornerStone detects and explains problems in a way that doesn't scare buyers away, but helps them make sound decisions regarding their prospective new home.

Ron believes there is an art to doing home inspections. "We help buyers understand why an 80-year-old home with uneven floors shouldn't cause panic." Some inspectors, for example, might notice a wiring issue and say, "If you don't get this fixed, the house could burn down." Ron's team, on the other hand, might mention that an electrician and \$25 in materials could easily alleviate the problem. In contrast to so-called "doomsday inspectors," the unskilled ones can prove to be much more damaging for the buyer. Most agents are well aware of greedy brokers using inexperienced inspectors who may miss or gloss over a home's defects just to close the deal quickly. Be assured, Ron's stellar line-up of inspectors won't be seen "cutting corners."

CornerStone customers walk away from their inspection feeling like they've received an in-depth workshop on home ownership. It's important to Ron that his inspectors educate clients to be proactive during the purchasing process. Making the inspection more of an educational experience pays off when Ron hears new homeowners remark, "I didn't know our refrigerator had a filter that needed to be changed every year!" After the inspection, clients are given their inspection report, loads of valuable information regarding home maintenance and repairs in an attractive three-ring binder, along with the book *How to Operate Your Home* by Tom Feiza. Also included is a list of highly recommended, reputable contractors of various trades (many offering valuable coupons). Customers are also strongly encouraged to use a customized checklist provided by CornerStone at their final walk-through. "We want them to be certain that the home they are buying is the same one we inspected two or three months ago," said Ron. "We are clear about the scope of the inspection, letting clients know exactly what we're looking for and conveying our findings using terms the client can easily understand."

What surprises Ron is that many people don't think they need to do inspections on new construction, assuming "new" means de-

fect- or problem-free. When CornerStone performs a "punch-list" inspection, clients are advised to submit the list of deficient items to their attorney so that the items can get addressed by the builder or negotiated, ultimately protecting their interest in the whole transaction. Ron recalls an inspection for a first-time buyer, involving a routine check of the new washer and dryer. It wasn't until neighbors beneath complained of water pouring through their ceiling that Ron discovered the washing machine drain, though installed, wasn't connected to pipes in the wall. Rather than submitting an insurance claim, the buyers were able to defer the cost of their neighbor's repairs to the builder since they did not yet own the home.

As thorough as they are, Ron admits, "Nobody's perfect, but we do stand behind our inspections." CornerStone works with a pool of contractors to clear up anything that might be missed in an inspection. Although not a common occurrence, mistakes by an inspector of this company are handled in a timely fashion. "Our inspections come with a limited guarantee, but we offer a 90-day warranty or 6-month warranty on appliances, water heater, furnace and air conditioning." As one of the few companies that offer warranty protection with every home inspection, lately Ron has noticed Realtors offering to buy the warranty for their clients as thank-you gifts.

Probably the most unique aspect of CornerStone is that all four inspectors are full-time firefighters. These men regularly perform fire safety inspections (required on commercial and residential properties with four or more units) as part of their duties as firefighters. Ron is proud of his "knowledgeable and experienced crew" and their ability to relate so well to first-time buyers. "Hunk" factor aside, each inspector's specialized training and knowledge of fire hazards and safety regulations gives the company the added value

Joe Zimmerman of @Properties strikes a pose with Ron at the 1586 N. Clybourn office.





Scott Sasse, owner/Realtor of Quest Realty located at 1905 W. Chicago Ave., braves the cold weather to take a photo with Ron.

of instant credibility.

Another plus for CornerStone is their use of the latest technology to provide cutting-edge service rarely seen in the growing crop of new home inspectors. Most noticeable is the use of a hand-held iPAQ pocket PC for all inspections. Clients don't have to wait for inspectors to compile a report. CornerStone inspectors are able to document their findings electronically, provide a printed copy for the customer on the spot, and forward copies to other parties involved in the sale. "On the day before a closing, time is essential," said Ron. "Nobody wants to sit around and wait for an inspection report to arrive when they're in the 11th hour of a deal."

In addition to their high-tech reporting systems, CornerStone uses the most advanced detection equipment available on the market. For example, "We've invested in an infrared thermal imaging camera that allows us to detect moisture behind finished walls. Wet building materials behind a finished wall will register a different temperature than dry." When examining a radiant heating system in a home's flooring, the infrared camera can actually show heat emanating from the unit's coils. The camera is also helpful for locating the source of leaks in roofs and behind walls where it's nearly impossible to pinpoint by sight.

CornerStone uses a variety of other tools to help them work smarter. One gadget is their high-tech moisture meter that can detect the moisture content of wood to a depth of about one inch behind drywall. Of course, this company of career firefighters uses a fire-department grade carbon monoxide detector, along with a "gas sniffer" to detect natural gas leaks.

These tools help CornerStone offer add-on services like an energy audit. Using the thermal imaging camera, inspectors are able to stand outside of a home in the winter and capture every place that a home

is losing heat. Inside the home, the camera can also easily pinpoint drafts. Armed with the results of their audit, customers can then take steps that will ultimately result in huge energy savings.

Many say you can judge a business by its clientele. If so, CornerStone will rank at the top of the field. Jeanine McShea, managing partner and Vice President of Sales for @Properties, relies on Ron three times a year to train new Realtors in a workshop format entitled, "What to Expect from Your Inspections." McShea praises Ron for being a "great teacher who goes through the entire inspection process, highlighting the agent's role." McShea is particularly fond of Ron's use of high-quality videos and humorous anecdotes during the training, giving agents a newfound appreciation of the inspection aspect of home selling. Often ending his sessions with a raffle for free Cubs tickets, Ron cleverly keeps his business on the minds of these potential future clients. In the early days of the business, Ron tried to think outside the box, finding new ways to show his appreciation for new referrals. "Back then I sent thank you cards along with a \$5 Starbucks gift card." To this day, 75-80% of clients come from Realtors while nearly 25% are from referrals from past satisfied customers.

Satisfied customers are the reason CornerStone was honored with a Super Service Award for 2006 with an overall "A" rating by Angie's List, a noted consumer watchdog company that rates over 250 categories of home contractors. CornerStone inspectors don't just advertise they're the best, they have both the clients and credentials to back it up.

Ron is determined to keep CornerStone at the forefront of the industry. With the rise of many inexperienced inspectors in the field, Ron is quick to point out, "A home inspection license isn't the most difficult to get, and carrying a flashlight and clipboard does not make you a top-notch inspector." Agents like Patrick Ronan of Coldwell Banker agree, describing Ron as "a pro from the word 'go.'" While others will use binoculars to examine the roof, [CornerStone's] guys are up there on ladders — they're not afraid to get dirty." Ronan adds, "They have no problem going on their hands and knees crawling through insulation." Ronan explained, "If we sell a house that causes the buyer to have to shell out big money on heating or plumbing, we will suffer the consequences. It's our reputation on the line."

The CornerStone staff takes a break at the firehouse. All four of CornerStone's inspectors are career firefighter/paramedics. GUYS YOU CAN TRUST!



Did You Know?

CornerStone's celebrity inspections include:

1. BILLY CORGAN – lead singer, SMASHING PUMPKINS
2. JIMMY STAFFORD – guitarist and founding member, TRAIN
3. MARTIN HAVLAT – right wing, CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS HOCKEY
4. BOB STOOPS – head coach, OKLAHOMA SOONERS FOOTBALL
5. NATE BERKUS – interior designer, OPRAH WINFREY SHOW
6. JOHN MOYER – lineman, CHICAGO RUSH, ARENA FOOTBALL

Joe Zimmerman, top @Properties agent (also featured on the cover of the October issue of *Real Estate Executive*), has been a loyal client for five years, and now exclusively refers all buyers to CornerStone. Zimmerman said, "They are reliable, knowledgeable and personable. They're able to make buyers comfortable — especially first-time buyers." Zimmerman couldn't help adding, "Ron gives agents great holiday presents to show his appreciation for our business."

Other satisfied clients like Jennifer Lane from Keller Williams are impressed by the responsiveness of the CornerStone team. "They are extremely timely. When I call for an inspection, they respond within minutes." Lane finds CornerStone's inspectors to be a "very generous, nice group of Chicago good-old boys — down-to-earth, with no airs," reminding Lane of Southern hospitality.

This generosity won over Stephanie Derderian, sales associate from Keller Williams. "One time, when my client admired a tool the inspector was using to test electrical outlets, he gave it to her. It charmed my client that he responded that way, and that made me happy, too." This willingness to go out of their way for clients is just one more reason CornerStone customers keep coming back.

Another hallmark of CornerStone's success is their commitment to follow up with clients. They graciously offer themselves as life-long resources for questions customers may have about their home and its maintenance and safety. Ellen Ronan of Coldwell Banker remembers a client buying a condo in a new development who was

Ron at home in Edison Park with his wife, Jennifer, and daughters, Maggie and Molly.



Ron at home in his office displaying his sports memorabilia and autographed photos of past celebrity clients that he has accumulated over the years.

told the appliances would be installed by the time of the inspection, but they were not. Ron let her know he couldn't do a thorough inspection without all the appliances installed, and agreed to return once they were. He didn't charge the buyer for the return visit, since the incomplete inspection was clearly not her fault. Ellen is certain other inspectors would have begun the next conversation with, "... well you know, I've already been out there once, so..." leaving the buyer no choice but to pay twice.

Scott Sasse of Quest Realty has seen his buyer-agent relationships solidified by having CornerStone in the transaction equation. "I've personally used CornerStone on well over 25 transactions with nothing but 100% client satisfaction." Sasse added, "I've never had a client call me to say that CornerStone missed a thing. That kind of reputation has led to nearly all of Quest's agents using CornerStone exclusively."

On the horizon for CornerStone is the creation of a new division within the company specializing in mold testing, assessment and evaluation. The new division, which will operate under the name The Mold Man, will have the ability to perform advanced mold surveys that will include air sampling, swab testing, carpet sampling and thermal imaging to detect and determine the extent of a mold problem within a home. Many agents discover properties where mold is an issue, but have no resource to guide clients on proper steps to take care of the problem. The Mold Man will deliver a detailed report outlining the location of the mold, the species and toxicity of the mold and make recommendations to remedy the problem. Finally, clients will be referred to a mold remediation company for abatement. Completing this process will protect families from the harmful health effects of an undetected mold problem within their current or prospective new residence.

What does Ron manage to do in his spare time? Of course, you'd expect a full-time firefighter to be physically fit, but Ron has definitely gone the "extra mile" as a two-time participant in the Chicago Marathon. Expanding his competitive aspirations, Ron has begun training to compete in the Half Iron-Man triathlon in early August held in Benton Harbor, MI. This event includes a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile bike ride, followed by a 13.1-mile run. With a family of four, a full-time career, a successful business and competition on his docket, Ron's life seems to scream, "Catch me if you can." However, CornerStone customers freely attest, catching up with Ron is no problem at all. ■

You may contact CornerStone Home Inspections at (773) 718-2500.