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ABLAZE Design Group's 50-Year Legacy

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Ablaze Design Group: Charting New Horizons in Home Improvement with a Legacy of Excellence and Innovation in Highland Park

By Paul Clements | Photos Courtesy of Ablaze Design Group



Straddling the borderline that meanders between Highland Park and Highwood, a family-owned company celebrates half a century of transforming homes and building community ties. Ablaze Design Group, formerly known as The ABL Group, marks its 50th anniversary with a significant rebranding that captures the essence of its evolution. From its modest beginnings as a local painting service to becoming a beacon of luxury design and construction, Ablaze has ignited a legacy of quality, innovation, and deep-rooted community engagement.

The journey of Ablaze Design Group is a testament to the vision of its founders, Howard and Miriam Lipsky, and the resilience and adaptability of their successors, son David, daughter Ava and son in-law George.

“Even back then, when we were known as ABL, people would always ask what ABL stands for, and we didn’t really have a clear answer,” reflects George

Markoutsas, CEO of ABLAZE Design Group. “The new name, “ABLAZE,” embodies the dynamic and cutting-edge services the company offers, symbolizing the fiery passion and excellence that have driven its success.”

In a family-owned business like ABLAZE Design Group, every team member plays a crucial role, often wearing multiple hats to ensure the company’s smooth operation and success. The diversified roles and responsibilities within the company underscore the collective effort required to manage and grow a small business effectively.

George Markoutsas oversees the strategic direction of the company. His journey from a teenage painter to CEO exemplifies the multifaceted leadership role he plays. “I wear a lot of hats - I’m involved in everything from strategic planning and marketing to design development and project management,” he said. This versatility is vital in navigating the complexities of the design-build industry.

Ava Markoutsas, CRM, focuses on customer relations, marketing strategies, and the management of the showroom. “I handle purchasing for the retail store and work closely with our customer service lead on generating new business,” she explained. Her role is pivotal in shaping the company’s brand image and ensuring client satisfaction.

David Lipsky, serving as the CFO, is the backbone of the company’s financial health and operational efficiency. “I manage all the finances, accounting, HR, and payroll to support the whole operation,” he stated. Lipsky’s expertise in finance and administration allows the creative and operational sides of the business to flourish without hindrance.

The collective efforts of the family and their team highlight the dynamic nature of roles in a small business. “We help each other out when needed. It takes all of us working as a cohesive unit,” Ava Markoutsas added. This collaborative approach has been instrumental in ABLAZE Design Group’s ability to adapt and thrive in the ever-changing landscape of design and construction.

The company began in 1974 when Howard Lipsky, Ava and David’s father, started a small painting business out of his own house and garage. Howard Lipsky’s influence extends far beyond the foundational bricks of a successful business; it encapsulates the profound impact of mentorship in the painting industry. His philosophy of treating each client as a lifelong partner has been a guiding beacon for the company.

George Markoutsas reflects on Lipsky’s ethos, “Howard really preached making every client feel their project was a priority. He went above and beyond to communicate that their home was important.” This client-for-life philosophy has not only shaped the company’s customer service approach but also fostered enduring relationships within the community.

The legacy of Howard and his wife Miriam is a testament to their visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to family, community, and business excellence. As pioneers in the industry, they set standards of quality and dedication that continue to guide the company’s operations.

Over the past five decades, ABLAZE Design Group has not only witnessed the evolution of home design and construction but has also been at the forefront of adopting new technologies to enhance its services. From its early days of manual drawings and face-to-face consultations, the company has seamlessly integrated sophisticated software and digital tools into its design and operational processes, setting a new standard for luxury design-build firms on the North Shore.

“We’ve come a long way from the typewriter days,” quipped David Lipsky, CFO of Ablaze Design Group. “Technology helps us operate more efficiently and provide a level of service that wasn’t possible years ago.”

Ablaze Design Group’s journey from traditional painting services to a tech-savvy design-build firm underscores a broader trend in the home improvement industry. Embracing technology has allowed Ablaze to remain competitive and responsive to the needs of modern homeowners, ensuring that the company’s legacy of quality, innovation, and community engagement continues to burn brightly into the future.

Ablaze Design Group not only designs and remodels homes but also builds community. The company, rooted in the area since its inception in 1974, goes beyond the blueprint to ensure its footprint extends into the heart of the community it serves. Over the years, their commitment to Highland Park and surrounding areas has woven a fabric of support, engagement, and mutual growth.

“We’ve always seen ourselves as more than just a business in the community. We’re part of the community,” Ava Markoutsas said.

This philosophy is reflected in Ablaze Design Group’s active participation in local initiatives, such as the Highland Park and Highwood Chambers of Commerce, where George Markoutsas has served as President. “Being involved in the Chamber of Commerce wasn’t just about business networking. It was about making a tangible difference in the community that has given us so much,” he said.





ABLAZE Design Group’s community involvement doesn’t stop at chambers. The company hosts events in their Downtown Highwood retail & designer showroom geared toward raising awareness and making money for local charities, believing that giving back is not just a responsibility but a privilege. Ava Markoutsas, highlighted the company’s Comedy ABLAZE events. “Every year, we look forward to hosting local charities like Gratitude Generation and Dup 15Q Alliance in our store for a night of shopping, socializing and good laughs while supporting a worthwhile cause,” she remarked. “Not only do the ticket sales benefit the charity, we also give 20% of all retail purchases that night back to the non profit.”

As ABLAZE Design Group looks to the future, its commitment to the community remains unwavering. “It’s about more than just the work we do. We want to be a contributing member of this community for years to come,” George concluded. Through their business operations and community involvement, ABLAZE Design Group not only designs and remodels spaces but also fosters a sense of unity, proving that their greatest project is the community they help build.

As the demands of clients evolved and the market shifted towards integrated design and construction services, Markoutsas saw an opportunity to guide the company in a new direction. “We were known more as a painting company. I wanted to grow our design-build services,” he noted. His vision was clear: to elevate ABLAZE Design Group from its traditional painting roots to a renowned design-build firm capable of executing complex renovation projects.

The design-build process at ABLAZE Design Group is not just about construction; it’s an intricate dance of creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving that transforms ordinary spaces into extraordinary homes. Central to this process is the company’s dedication to working closely with clients, understanding their dreams and constraints, and navigating the myriad challenges that renovation projects entail.

George Markoutsas, emphasizes the importance of a collaborative approach. “We work closely with clients on their projects from start to finish,” he stated. This partnership begins with listening and understanding clients’ visions, then meticulously planning to bring these visions to life within the practical confines of budget and space.”

Creative problem-solving is at the heart of ABLAZE Design Group’s success, often requiring innovative approaches to overcome common and unforeseen challenges in the design-build process. Markoutsas shared an example, “We had a client who was convinced they needed to add an addition to their house to achieve their dream kitchen. After reviewing their goals and the existing space, we redesigned the floor plan to avoid the costly addition, saving them significant time and money.”

This ability to find creative solutions is not just about expertise and experience; it’s about a mindset of flexibility and innovation. We’ve learned to identify issues early in the design phase to avoid costly mistakes down the line,” Markoutsas explained. ABLAZE’s team leverages their extensive experience to foresee potential issues, ensuring a seamless flow and functionality in every project.

Moreover, ABLAZE Design Group’s process is deeply influenced by the philosophy of uniting form and function, a principle that guides every decision. “Our design process aims to balance aesthetic appeal with practicality, drawing on the philosophy of architects like Frank Lloyd Wright,” Markoutsas said. This approach ensures that renovations not only look spectacular but also enhance the homeowners’ quality of life.”

Ava Markoutsas highlighted the firm’s dedication to client satisfaction, “Our goal is to not just meet but exceed our clients’ expectations, turning their homes into spaces that reflect their personality and lifestyle.”

In navigating the complex journey of home renovation, ABLAZE Design Group stands out for its collaborative spirit, creative problem-solving, and unwavering commitment to excellence. Through open communication, innovative design, and meticulous execution, the company continues to transform homes and lives, one project at a time.

In the realm of home renovations, aging properties pose unique challenges that require a thoughtful approach to ensure both the preservation of character and the incorporation of modern conveniences. ABLAZE Design Group has honed its expertise in navigating these challenges, prioritizing renovations that enhance both functionality and aesthetic appeal for homeowners.

George Markoutsas, outlines a strategic approach for tackling renovations in older homes. “Our first step is often addressing the essentials – checking the roof, gutters, and drainage systems to protect the home’s foundation and integrity,” he explained. This preventive measure ensures that any subsequent renovations are built on a solid and secure structure.”

Given the significant role kitchens and bathrooms play in a home’s overall functionality and value, Markoutsas emphasizes their importance in the renovation process. “We prioritize updating the kitchen and primary bathroom not only to improve daily living but also to increase the home’s market value,” he stated. These spaces often require a delicate balance between modernizing amenities and preserving or replicating historical details that contribute to the home’s charm.

ABLAZE also focuses on creating efficient and practical living spaces that meet the current needs of homeowners. “Adding or improving mudrooms and walk-in closets can dramatically enhance the organization and storage

capabilities of an older home,” Markoutsas added. These updates, while seemingly minor, can significantly improve the quality of life for residents.

The journey from concept to completion in home design and renovation is fraught with potential obstacles. ABLAZE Design Group, through its years of experience, has developed a keen ability to navigate these challenges with creative and pragmatic solutions.

One of the most common challenges involves managing clients’ expectations within the constraints of their budget and the physical limitations of their space. “It’s about finding that sweet spot where design aspirations meet practical realities,” Markoutsas said. He recalled instances where clients desired extensive changes that were either not feasible or would significantly exceed their budget. “In these cases, our job is to guide them towards solutions that achieve a similar impact without compromising the project’s integrity or their financial comfort.”

Furthermore, the challenge of updating homes to meet contemporary standards of energy efficiency and sustainability without sacrificing their historical essence is increasingly prevalent. “Incorporating more efficient systems, insulation, and new windows into older homes requires a delicate balance between enhancing comfort and maintaining architectural integrity,” he elaborated.

“Every project presents a unique set of challenges, but through collaboration with our clients and leveraging our team’s creativity and expertise, we navigate these hurdles to bring our clients’ vision to life,” Markoutsas concluded. This dedication to excellence and client satisfaction ensures that even the most challenging projects result in homes that are not only beautiful and functional but also a true reflection of the homeowners’ aspirations and lifestyles.

The evolution of ABLAZE Design Group mirrors the evolving desires and demands of homeowners, pushing the boundaries of creativity, functionality, and technology in home design and renovation. “Our mission has always been to exceed our clients’ expectations, transforming their living spaces into personalized sanctuaries that reflect their lifestyle, taste, and the memories they cherish,” Markoutsas reflected.

The company’s adaptability, coupled with a deep-rooted passion for design and craftsmanship, has propelled ABLAZE Design Group to the forefront of the industry, setting the standard for excellence. Its collaborative approach to projects, commitment to solving complex design and renovation challenges, and dedication to preserving the character and integrity of homes, underscore the company’s role as a trusted partner in bringing homeowners’ visions to life.

“As we look to the future, we’re excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. We remain committed to pushing the envelope in design and construction, ensuring that our legacy of excellence, innovation, and community service continues for generations to come,” Markoutsas concluded. In fact ABLAZE Design Group was recently recognized for their work by ASID (American Society of Interior Designers) and NARI (National Association of the Remodeling Industry) taking home three coveted awards as well as winning the “Best Rebrand” by Modern Luxury CS Magazine.

As the company embarks on the next 50 years, its journey remains a beacon of inspiration, not just for those within the design and construction industry but for anyone who believes in the power of dreaming big and building from the heart.

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