

Canadian Home Workshop magazine

Doing It Right

By Jay Somerset

The camera focuses in: two celebrities; double paparazzi points. Click. On the viewfinder, an image of actor Angelina Jolie walking through the Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans, where hurricane Katrina wreaked the most damage in 2005. To her right, a brawny, clean-cut man in contractor overalls and work boots walks slightly ahead, gesturing Jolie like he's got a plan that'll fix everything. Or so it seems. After all, this isn't any contractor, this is Mike Holmes and when he speaks, people listen.

They're in town to help Jolie's spouse, Brad Pitt, and his Make It Right foundation's neighbourhood rebuild. The plan: help displaced families by building sustainable housing that can withstand severe weather. Holmes—who not only owns the trademark “Make It Right” but also has it tattooed on his right bicep—contacted the Pitt crew saying they should work in tandem. Soon enough, Mike and the *Holmes on Homes* TV team flew south, to build and to film a special six-part series for HGTV.

“It's about doing something that's a new beginning,” Holmes said in a Sun Media interview last September. “It's not about TV. I don't care about TV and I mean that.”

For a man whose made his fortune—and cemented his celebrity—through television, these are tough words. His show, *Holmes on Homes*, ran seven seasons and made Holmes a household name in Canada. Now, thanks to frequent broadcasts south of the border (as well as in the U.K., Australia and South Africa), Holmes has become an unlikely export; a DIY-TV wunderkind whose name and image—dusty brown overalls, diamond stud earring, tank top and work boots—have outgrown Canadian idolatry. Come fall, a new series, titled *Holmes Inspection*, will begin, and with it the ever-growing The Holmes Group empire of books, DVDs, branded clothing, swag and advertising endorsements, not to mention monies earned through actual renovation projects. Not bad for a 46-year-old divorced father of three from east-end Toronto.

“I remember him telling me about his idea for a new show, saying, ‘It's going to be huge; it's going to change the building industry,’” says painter Craig Lowe, owner of Lowe Painting in Toronto and *Holmes on Homes* regular who first met Holmes on a jobsite two years before the show began. “I was sceptical, but even back then, if he told you he was going to build the Sistine Chapel, you just knew he was going to do it.”

Holmes' idea, that every homeowner can relate to shoddy work by a lazy or incompetent contractor, derived from lessons learned from his father, who, so the legend goes, had young Mike swinging hammers at age 6. Growing up blue collar, Holmes' father taught him the family mantra: “if you're going to do it do it right the first time,” and, of course, “make it right.”

In the late 1990s, long before Holmes name was uttered alongside Brangelina, Holmes was running Restovate, a small renovation outfit in the GTA. Around this time, Holmes applied to be

a set builder on *Just Ask Jon Eakes*, a home-improvement show that ran six years on HGTV. “He looked exactly the same: a big, cuddly teddy bear that was also G. I. Joe,” remembers Jon Eakes. “He worked really hard and my producer saw some opportunities there.” Holmes was given a few short segments on the show, and by the end of the season, Holmes, alongside Eakes’ producer and several crew members parted ways with Eakes to begin work on a new show.

“Mike had a fever about getting out his message,” says Shawn Morren, owner of True To Form Renovation Inc. in Toronto and *Holmes On Homes*’ jobsite foreman for the first five seasons and watched as Holmes’ celebrity rose. “At first it was a honk of recognition from a passing car or a contractor would pull up to shake Mike’s hand,” he says. Letters from homeowners grew from less than 50 a week to 10,000 a month, and by the end of Season 4, Holmes could no longer shop Home Depot without getting mobbed. “We used to get e-mails telling us about upcoming articles he was part of, or that he’d be on [Toronto radio station] Q107 or at the Gemini’s. Then suddenly he’d gotten so big you couldn’t go out with him anymore. There was just something about the fans—they were diehard; people take him really seriously.”

As the show grew, Mike seemed to keep his cool, his ego in check; an affable yet stern boss. “Nobody razzes him. You joke with him, but he’s the one making the jokes. Everyone values their position and nobody’s going to walk that line too closely,” says Lowe.

“He’s portrayed to be more of a perfectionist tight-ass than he really is,” adds Morren. “He’s actually pretty laid-back.” Fans might be surprised to learn, for example, that Holmes grew up not as a schoolyard ruffian but as a student in love with theatre; in Grade 7 he performed in his school’s rendition of *Grease*, and a year later, he was *Dodger* in *Oliver!*, a part that required singing. “I love soft music,” Holmes revealed in an interview with *TV Guide*, “romantic music, real quiet music. Everybody thinks I’m a rocker, but I’m not even close. I also like to dance.”

Performing in front of his classmates might have prepared Holmes for the camera, but not the gruelling hours required of reality TV. While a few cast members have remained with Holmes throughout the seasons, most couldn’t hack the gruelling hours and meagre pay, with sub-trades typically working for free and crew members earning about \$1,000 a week. “It’s reveal day and you’ve been busting your ass for weeks,” Morren says. “And then at the last second you’ve got to finish the painting, install the lights; the electrician’s got a problem, the painting over the caulking is about to crack. It’s midnight and the cameraman is asking you to redo something because he didn’t get it on film.”

While Holmes’ “tear it all down” approach rings true to homeowners, not all contractors are happy with how he portrays the industry. After signing an endorsement deal with Home Depot, Holmes’ image was plastered around the store, “and you’d see contractors drawing little moustaches on his face,” says Morren.

In October 2006 Holmes wrote an article in *The Globe and Mail* about home inspectors. “He slammed the entire industry; called us all boneheads in bed with the real estate agents,” says Andrew Christie, a civil engineer technologist and registered home inspector who’s company, Safe Homes Canada, has been in business for 14 years. While it’s easy to obtain a home-

inspector license, some, like Christie, have backgrounds in building science and engineering and are better suited to inspect a house than a contractor. “Everybody has a decision to make: do I work with integrity or not? It doesn’t matter what business you’re in. So to slam everybody is rather sad and driven by sensationalism.” That Holmes’ new show will focus on home inspections doesn’t please Christie.

“Holmes gives the impression that the entire reno industry is corrupt,” says Eakes. “He learned to do things ‘right’ by his father, so you hear him say on his show that something’s not up to code.” Appearing on Holmes’ show early on, Eakes remembers filming in an attic space. “He was going on about how the duct work wasn’t up to code and I thought, OK, this is his show, don’t contradict him on camera. But I knew he was wrong. The code didn’t say anything about the detail he was pointing at, so in a way, it was code, just not his code.”

Because Holmes never reveals the names of the so-called delinquent renovators, the viewer is left with a one-sided story: renovator bad, Holmes good. But while there are certainly bad contractors, sometimes it’s the client that’s in the wrong. While you don’t see this on Holmes’ show, it happens frequently, says Lowe. “Mike comes riding in on a white horse and the homeowner starts demanding things, treating us poorly. It’s a really odd part of human nature.”

Jim Caruk—host of *Real Renos*, a TV show that offers viewers insight into contractor and client relations, and Holmes fellow judge on *Handyman Superstar Challenge*—suggests there can be two sides to renovations woes. In a recent episode, Caruk and his team took over a renovation after the homeowners dismissed their contractor over personality conflicts. “The clients didn’t let him do his job, always second-guessing him; he did nothing wrong, and that’s partly why I agreed to film the reno—to show that the contractor isn’t always at fault.” Other episodes might show the opposite—with the contractor wearing the dunce cap. “That’s what sets our show apart: it’s about real money, real time, real heartache.” In other words, it’s not a superhero show.

Like him or loathe him, there’s no denying the growing presence that is Mike Holmes. “He’s got that Martha Stewart, Oprah thing going on just a little bit!” exclaims Morren, who hopes Holmes will make good on his original goal: to bring the renovation industry into the green age with highly efficient, sustainable houses. “I think he really believes he can make a difference, and that drives him.”

It’s difficult to forecast how popular Mike Holmes will become. “He worked down here relatively unbothered by fans or gawkers,” says Dave Walker, TV columnist for *The Times-Picayune* newspaper in New Orleans. “When I mentioned that he was going to be here and that I was excited about meeting him, the typical reaction was, ‘Who?’”

So he’s not on the same A-list as Brangelina. But he’s dreaming big. “A few times, when it’s just the two of us, old friends, I’ve asked him if he ever thought things would get this big,” says Lowe. “I’ve asked him this question three times over the years and each time he’s said the same thing: yes.”

Sidebar: Joe Average on Holmes

Ever wonder what it's like to be on reality TV? Toronto-based photographer Dave Starrett knows firsthand; in 2005 he appeared on *Holmes On Homes* (Episode: Falling Flat; Season 5). After hiring a contractor to build his garage, he discovered the floor was uneven and the roof leaked. "I'd heard of [Holmes] and after watching a few episodes I decided to write the show."

Working with a partner, Starrett put together a "funny website with a letter describing the problem," he says. After some back and forth—"they wanted to make sure I wasn't a kook," he says—he was shortlisted, and that's when Holmes came for a visit. "He was wearing the overalls and white shirt. He told me he's got 30 pairs of them."

At that time the show was getting about 50 requests a week, but by the time filming got underway, the show had really taken off. "I would have never gotten on the show in later seasons," says Starrett.

Holmes' crew were at Starrett's abode for eight weeks, with the film crew only present when Holmes was around. "There were days when I'd wake up to the sound of hammering on the roof. Then I'd go to work all day, play hockey and go for a few drinks, and when I'd get home they'd still be working. Sometimes they'd even sleep in their trucks in the driveway."

Unlike some reality TV, where scenes are scripted for dramatic effect, Starrett says there was no facade with Holmes. "There's no director calling 'action' or anything like that, except during the initial interview scene when Mike's asking me a bunch of questions, but there's no rehearsal."

Because the final reno is supposed to be a surprise, the show producers would prefer the homeowner stayed away during construction, "but I was still living there, so I got quite friendly with the crew. I'd bring them coffee in the morning and we'd have some beers after work." Starrett got to try out tools he'd never used, such as a jackhammer, but never on camera.

"It's the Mike show, not the Dave and Mike show. They want to make it look like they rode in on a golden horse and saved the day. And in a way, it really was like that. I felt like I'd won the lottery." His only regret: "It sounds weird hearing yourself on TV."

Sidebar: What does Holmes Make?

Since 2004, *Holmes On Homes* has been HGTV's top-rated show. Now internationally syndicated, the show is a virtual moneymaking machine. But "Canada's most trusted contractor" isn't just famous, he's also rich: a blue-collar millionaire whose empire, The Holmes Group, also includes DVDs, books, branded clothing and advertising endorsements. With a new series on the way, there's no denying he's making a bundle.

While no one will say for certain, there are a few known numbers. "We get about \$100,000 a show," says Jim Caruk, host of *Real Renos*, the second-highest-rated show on HGTV, "which is about two-thirds what Mike pulls in," which means Holmes is generating at least \$175,000 an episode. "The rest of the money comes from the job itself, which the client pays for."

"When I was on the show, Mike said the job would cost \$60,000, so could I pay half," says Dave Starrett, who appeared on the "Falling Flat" episode in Season 5. With most of the materials

thrown in for free, as well as sub-trades working for the glory and crew members earning about \$1,000 a week, margins are big—a lot bigger than when Jon Eakes became the first-ever DIY TV personality.

“In 1978 I was amongst the top 10 per cent best-paid actors in Canada, bringing in \$6,000 a year,” says Eakes. “We’d have lunches with the sponsor that were three times my operating budget.” By 1986, things shifted a bit. “We were getting about \$20,000 a show, in the range of industrial videos,” he says. Then, when HGTV came along, “budgets changed dramatically.”

So, how much is Holmes worth? While he’s certainly a millionaire, his net worth is cloudy. But, one thing’s certain: there’s a good chance that stud in his left ear isn’t a zircon.