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# Big Footprints

**Tom Cullins, a senior partner with the Burlington architectural firm Truex Cullins & Partners, has often strayed far from his Burlington roots — but has always returned.**

JEFF CLARKE

## Tom Cullins is leaving some big shoes to fill and some big footprints in the landscape with his name on them

by Virginia Lindauer Simmon

**B**ack in October 1987, when we first wrote about the architectural firm where Tom Cullins is a senior partner, he was an ex-employee. What we know to day as Truex Cullins & Partners, Architects was, in 1987, Alexander Truex DeGroot; Cullins had his own practice.

The story of how Cullins, a Burlington native and fourth-generation Vermonter — “on both sides,” he’s quick to say — arrived at the firm, left and returned is fascinating, to say the least. It’s a story that starts in Burlington, expands to the other side of the globe and, after what Cullins calls “a little blip,” comes back to its roots.

An award-winning architect, award-winning photographer, a watercolorist and world traveler, Cullins grew up the son of a Burlington insurance agent. “He was an athlete, but his son came out the artist,” says Cullins with a grin.

That’s probably due to Cullins’ mother, who, when he was ill as a child, would stick a paint brush in his hand to occupy him., and his grandfather, who stuck a 35 millimeter camera in his hand at age 16, just before his first trip to Eu-

rope. “Both of those activities have given me such joy and have become integral with my architectural work and process.”

Nowadays, when he and his wife, Kelly, travel to their summer home in Greece, says Cullins, “I paint probably four hours a day, seven days a week and take photographs on the side.”

But that’s getting ahead of the story.

After graduation from Burlington High School, Cullins attended Syracuse University, where he earned a bachelor of architecture, followed by a one-year master’s class at Harvard Graduate School of Design.

After that — “sort of late 1967 or early ‘68” — he returned to Burlington and joined Burlington Associates, the architectural firm where he had worked summers during college.

“It was terrific,” says Cullins. Probably the noteworthy building I worked on at that time in that office was St. Paul’s Cathedral.” He co-designed St. Paul’s with Bill Henderson, a partner in Burlington Associates.

By the time St. Paul’s opened in 1973, Cullins had met and married Kelly Knapp, a friend from SU, and they had a daughter.

**Richard Deane (left), David Epstein and Rolf Kielman (not pictured) are the younger partners who will eventually inherit the legacy created by Tom Cullins and Bill Truex.**



Burlington Associates ceased business in 1975, and Cullins entered a partnership with an architect named Willem DeGroot. Two years later, they merged with Alexander Truex, the firm owned by Gene Alexander and Bill Truex, and the firm became Alexander Truex DeGroot Cullins.

By 1980, Bill Henderson had become director of an office in Athens, Greece, with a commission to design Saudi Arabian embassies in various countries. "We had worked together on St. Paul's, and he felt I would be a great person to design the Saudi Arabian embassy to Qatar on the Persian Gulf," says Cullins.

Cullins and Kelly had always loved Greece, so he decided to take a one-year leave of absence from the office. "My daughter, who was 6 at that time, Kelly and I moved right down into the teeming heart of Athens, Greece."

About two months into the job, Henderson left, and Cullins was asked to take over the directorship of the Athens office, which employed 45 people. Athens was the design office of a larger group, with a home office in Jeddah, production office in London and a research office in Paris.

He was having fun; the family was having fun, "visiting Italy, North Africa, traveling to Paris," he says. After discussions with Truex, Cullins resigned from the Burlington firm and continued living in Athens and working throughout the Middle East for four more years.

Time came, though, he says, when "it just became clear that it was time for the three of us — for Kelly and myself professionally and to get our daughter back into an American system — to come back to the States.

Back in Burlington, Kelly found work at St. Michael's College, and Cullins opened an office where he worked on a num-

ber of projects in the Middle East. "I started hiring people, and my office grew." This was at the end of 1984.

"1985 was a little blip," says Cullins with the kind of gross understatement people use to introduce a difficult subject. The subject is the hijacking of TWA flight 847, which he was flying home from Athens on June 14. He and 152 other passengers were diverted to Algiers and eventually Beirut and held hostage by terrorists for 17 days. The terrorists demanded the release of Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners from Israel, and one hostage, an American sailor, was killed. Cullins acted as the hostages' spokesman in media appearances.

"That was a very difficult time, primarily for Kelly and my family, because I knew what was happening to me; and my family and close friends back here, they didn't know. I feel extremely fortunate that I was released," he continues. "I don't think in these days I would have been."

Cullins insists the experience didn't change him, but says it made his family stronger. "It offered me the tremendous opportunity to reassess my life, and on a day-by-day basis, appreciate each day." Here he laughs. "The main thing it did: I used to have a very hard time getting up talking in front of groups of people, and obviously I was forced by this event to do that, and it gave me a perspective. Whenever I go in now to make a presentation, I'll say to myself, 'Tom, this is not a problem. You had a problem, and this is not a problem.'"

Cullins was able to create some good from his experience when he was asked by American Airlines to help counsel its top administration and service staff about dealing with hostage situations. He also worked with the State Department, he says, "and designed a film for embassy and State Department personnel with helpful hints and experiences that might be beneficial to them if they were ever in a similar situation."

Most important was that he and Kelly resumed their lives. "Fortunately, my clients had waited for me," he says. "There were a number of people asking me to write books or do films or get involved in lots of other legal matters, and eventually, Kelly and I, we scrapped them all. Not that we're going to forget about all of this, but we needed to go back to our normal lives."

His work continued to grow as he was doing projects in the United States and the Middle East. "It got to a point where I needed significant staff," he says.

He and Truex had remained friends, and one day, over lunch, Cullins mentioned that need to Truex, who mentioned that he, too, had a number of projects that needed design help. "We looked at each other and said, 'Now wait a minute; can we do this?' So in 1989, we re-merged and started growing our business."

Not that there weren't economic hard times, he adds. "Just after we merged, Bill had one client who went bankrupt; I had a nonpayment of invoices from the Middle East, and the economy went sour. If it were not for Dudley Davis [late president of Merchants Bank] and his support at that time, our firm would not be today," he says.

They began to develop work for colleges and institutions, still a key source of work for them. Vermont Law School hired them to design a library, the first of many projects for the school. "We are the only architectural firm they've worked with," says Cullins.

The team has done a prodigious amount of work for Champlain

## Tom Cullins



JEFF CLARKE

**Bill Truex (left) is the other senior partner with Tom Cullins. They are working on a transition plan that involves placing more and more responsibility in the hands of their two younger partners.**

College and St. Michael's College and some for the University of Vermont.

"Tom just has an incredible eye for design," says Roger Perry, president of Champlain College, who has hired the firm for several projects during his tenure. "He has an uncanny ability to listen to clients and translate their wishes into design."

The business has grown to encompass five markets: the education and cultural component; corporate, commercial and government, with projects such as the headquarters for Vermont Student Assistance Corp. in Winooski, Burton Snowboard and Seventh Generation; resort and recreation projects, such as work at Trapp Family Lodge, Topnotch, Okemo and Lake Placid Lodge; residential — about 20 percent to 30 percent of the firm's work is residential, unusual for larger firms; and interiors, which Cullins says is "exploding" under the leadership of Kim Deetjen.

In addition, Truex Cullins has a history of general planning, "probably starting from our early work on the Church Street Marketplace, which was spearheaded by Bill Truex working with Pat Robins," says Cullins. The Winooski master plan "kind of grew out of this office," he continues, "and we do a lot of master planning for college campuses. Bill Truex has a wonderful, major master planning project on a brownfield on the coastline near Providence, R.I." The firm continues to work abroad, having just finished a library at the American Community School at Thessaloniki, Greece.

The staff has grown in number to 42, and volume has risen 50 percent in the

last year. "One of the most important hires Bill and I ever made," says Cullins, "was an architect named Rolf Kielman, who soon after he came here, became a partner and now is president of our company." Two other young partners, Richard Deane and David Epstein, complete the firm's ownership. Cullins says the hiring of Robert "Sparky" Millikin as director of operations a few years ago has made the firm more efficient, particularly in collecting on invoices.

With an eye on retirement, Truex and Cullins have devised a five-year transition plan to turn the firm over to the younger partners. They're about halfway through it. "Tom and I chose to create a legacy," says Truex, "not to sell to outsiders."

After he's retired, Cullins will no doubt find more time for golf, a renewed passion. "My father was a superb golfer," he says. "I wish I was as good as he was. He was president of Burlington Country Club in the '50s. I started playing there in the late '50s and '60s, then didn't play for many years. After my hijacking, I did a major assessment, and I said, 'I'm going to play some golf.' I rejoined the country club in 1985 and have had a wonderful time ever since." ●

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