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Making It Big in Boston Real Estate

Curtis Kemeny Becomes a Major Player in the City's Residential Market



Curtis Kemeny started working in the real estate business when he was 12 years old by tagging along on weekends with his stepfather, who was a developer. Curtis did a

little bit of everything in those days, including mowing lawns, sweeping floors, and stripping wallpaper.

"I learned the business from the ground up," said Curtis, who is now president of Boston Residential Group, a development firm that has a portfolio of more than 1,100 housing units in the Boston area. "I am as passionate about it today as I was as a child. My experience has given me a good understanding of what is required for success."

After getting his early real-estate education working with his stepfather, Curtis graduated from Dartmouth College and then became an acquisitions officer and project manager for Cohen Properties in Boston. In that role, he was involved in the development of U.S.\$350 million in residential and commercial properties.



"Real estate development is a highly creative endeavor that combines several varied disciplines," Curtis said. "It starts with raising the capital required to make acquisitions where one can create significant value that meets investor expectations about risk and returns. The next step is matching the product with customer needs in innovative ways. Managing construction is the manufacturing part of the business, which requires strict process discipline and cost control.

"Finally, one must market and sell the final product, and that process has become increasingly sophisticated and multifaceted in recent years. Few businesses have so many interesting aspects. A developer is like the producer and director of a movie, and I find the product every bit as exciting."



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Boston, Los Angeles
1989–1997

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Following his initial foray into real estate development, Curtis earned his M.B.A. from Harvard Business School. He worked for a summer at BCG's Boston office and then decided to take a break from real estate to join BCG full time, focusing on health care. He said his eight years of consulting experience have proven invaluable in his current role.



"Looking at situations from the CEO's perspective while I was at BCG helped me learn to start with sound strategic thinking, to identify the key levers for creating value, and then to execute crisply to realize that value," Curtis said. "That lesson comes into play for me frequently as the CEO of my own business."

Curtis also said the presentation and project management experience he gained at BCG has been a big part of his success.

"One has to be dynamic and persuasive to raise money for projects, and your project teams must be excited and engaged as the challenges of the execution phase present themselves," he said. "Those skills were honed at BCG, and they help me every day."

After working at BCG, Curtis became president and chief operating officer of the T.H. Niles Real Estate Group, where he helped refocus the company's housing portfolio as the market was changing. In 2004, he combined the property portfolios of his and the Niles families to create Boston Residential Group.

Curtis said that succeeding in the Boston area is indeed a challenge because it is a relatively small, highly competitive market.

"Boston has a tough permitting environment and is a supply-constrained market with demand growing at only 2 to 3 percent annually on average," Curtis said. "Our strategy is to be the high-quality niche player that serves the luxury market over the full life cycle of the customer."



"Customers' needs evolve at each stage of their lives—from the time they are young couples living downtown, to the time they move to the suburbs to raise their kids, to the time they move back downtown as retiring empty nesters. Boston Residential Group is a trusted brand for customers who appreciate quality, style, and service at each one of these stages of their lives."

Since he does compare his work with that of a film producer and director, it is fitting that it's the behind-the-scenes action that Curtis enjoys most about the real estate business. He loves chasing down deals and finding new projects to work on, he enjoys the political process of getting permits and approvals, and he also likes the challenge of developing a product that is an ideal match for its market.

"We develop people's homes," he said. "The moment of truth comes when people hand us \$3 million for a condominium and tell us how much they truly love the product. That's a particularly satisfying moment for me."

Curtis's properties include a Frank Gehry-designed building on Boston's fashionable Newbury Street, a 54-unit loft-style condominium development that has 13-foot ceilings, eye-popping views of the city, and very high-end finishes.

"360 Newbury takes the loft-style product to a new level of sophistication in Boston," Curtis noted. "That location combines the elegance of the Back Bay with the edginess of the South End. It is a slice of SoHo (New York) in Boston. We designed the product to fit with customers who have a similar sensibility."

Curtis sees the company growing to several times its current size, but he also has goals beyond profitability and revenues. He believes real estate development is a team sport, and he values his employees, a dynamic group of people who love what they do. He constantly strives to serve customers and regularly surveys them to gauge Boston Residential Group's performance.

Curtis also provides rich financial returns to his investors, ensuring that he has the capital required to do the next deal. In addition, he knows it's essential to cultivate the company's relationships with politicians, neighborhood groups, permitting agencies, and others so that projects get the approvals required to realize them.

"The values of our firm are simple and they reflect my own," Curtis said. "My goal is that our customers, employees, investors, and partners know us as a company that understands and respects their needs and consistently exceeds their expectations for the product and service quality we deliver. That trust is earned, and it is what I strive for every day."