Tiny Houses, Big Dreams

Ron Wagner ’93
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David Latimer ’05 is making national waves with his company, New Frontier Tiny Homes.
When David Latimer started New Frontier Tiny Homes in 2015, he didn’t envision The Alpha, his flagship model, sitting in the Oculus Plaza at the World Trade Center being broadcast on ABC’s “Good Morning America.” But that’s exactly what happened in December.

Freeform, formerly known as ABC Family, unveiled The Alpha as one its “25 Days of Christmas” presents that were given away to families impacted by hurricanes, fires or other natural disasters.

“It was so surreal to have my tiny house pull up to the World Trade Center in the middle of downtown Manhattan,” he says.

New Frontier, based in Nashville, Tennessee, wasn’t featured by accident. Freeform selected The Alpha after a national search.

“They looked at every tiny house company they could and said ‘We want this one,’” Latimer says.

There’s a certain irony to a tiny house being given away in the shadow of the tallest building in the United States, and that dichotomy is what prompted Latimer to immerse himself in the tiny homes movement in the first place.

Everything about Nashville right now screams “more.” More people (the metropolitan area grew nearly 10 percent from 2010 to 2015, climbing to over 1.8 million). More buildings (glittering new construction has transformed the once-dormant skyline). More coming (so many cranes loom on seemingly every corner that the Nashville Business Journal has created an interactive map just to keep track of all the new structures).

As he spoke, Latimer was sitting at a table he pulled from under The Alpha’s kitchen floor. At approximately 245 square feet, The Alpha has no rooms to fill up with unneeded stuff because there’s just one room.

Seven other people could join Latimer at the table, however, and above the kitchen space is a kingsized bed. The ceiling is made of reclaimed barnwood, the floor of recycled pallets, the exterior Shou Sugi Ban-treated cedar. Every detail screams mid-century modern with an Asian flair. Quite simply, it’s beautiful, and Latimer’s designs have gained a cult status in the tiny home community.

New Frontier has been featured by dozens of media outlets, including Architectural Digest, the New York Post, the Huffington Post and Country Living, while showing up twice on HGTV’s “Tiny House, Big Living.”

The term “tiny house” describes dwellings that range from 100 to 400 square feet while also describing a social trend focused on downsizing and

A n English major who was one class short of a philosophy double at Furman, Latimer is not what you’d call an in-the-box thinker. So perhaps it’s not surprising that all of that “more” makes him see . . . less.

“I’m a big sustainability person, and the amount of materials we use in our construction process is grotesque. So much waste,” Latimer says. “And we wind up building all these rooms that we don’t need to fill with stuff that we don’t use.”
simplifying life. It caught Latimer’s attention after he faced a career crossroads when an upscale bar he opened failed, dealing an ego blow to the self-described competitive perfectionist.

“This was going to be the flagship of what would become a national brand, and it was a disaster,” he says. “I did a lot of soul-searching, and during this time I came across the tiny house movement. It just reached out to me.”

An outstanding high school football player who scored a remarkable 40 touchdowns as a senior at Christ Presbyterian Academy in Nashville, Latimer went to Furman on a football scholarship. Almost immediately, however, he struggled with a litany of physical ailments that plagued him throughout his career and nearly led to a transfer.

“I had an injury right before our first game and wound up redshirting, and that was a game-changer for me. It took all my passion out,” Latimer says. “I didn’t like Furman at the beginning socially, and I wasn’t really engaged academically.”

However, perseverance paid off.

“I wanted to pursue other things that were more creative. I was sick of football and wanted to quit. But I didn’t, and a lot of really good things came from that,” he says. “I learned to find joy in the midst of misery and of great challenge. I learned to take one day and one moment at a time.”

Latimer went on to play three seasons under coach Bobby Lamb, winning a Southern Conference championship in 2004. After graduation, he traveled the world and spent a year in Mutungu, Uganda, where he helped build an orphanage before winding his way back to his hometown and partnering with Zac Thomas, a well-known local builder, to form New Frontier.

Interest has been overwhelming, with a constant bombardment of inquiries about their products from all over the country and the world, but New Frontier’s sales have proven to be much more elusive. Latimer faces a challenge not unlike that faced by Elon Musk with his Teslas: often being unable to sell
Latimer designs all of the New Frontier Tiny Homes’ models, which have drawn rave national reviews.

people a product they want to buy because of entrenched institutional hurdles.

Tiny homes, which have wheels, are banned from many areas because of zoning restricting mobile homes, and even if there’s a place for one, banks often refuse to finance their purchase because they’re classified as chattel – personal property – or simply not valuable enough if they rest on a foundation.

“People keep telling me you’ve created a great product, and that was the hardest part. I’m like, no, selling the product’s been the hardest part,” Latimer says. “I would have sold sixty to a hundred homes in the past six months if it weren’t for zoning. These things are changing. It’s a matter of when, not if.”

Instead, he sold five in 2017 and turned his attention to finding other revenue streams.

“How do I make them standard and affordable?” Latimer says. “You start with the luxury market, sustain your business, pay for the growth and the expansion and the economies of scale with revenue until the market can catch up.”

To that end, New Frontier has created a division offering custom spaces. Rhone, an online men’s fitness apparel company, uses one as a mobile retail center, and Latimer is supplying two new designs for the artists’ retreat that renowned children’s book author Cornelia Funke is building in California.

The most ambitious project, however, is a tiny house hotel the company will own in Nashville and hopes to open by the summer of 2018. The idea is to drive prices down without sacrificing quality, generating more sales and buying more time for Latimer to realize his ultimate dream of working with the city to create an affordable housing community out of tiny homes.

“Starting a business is hard. Starting a new business in which your product is illegal and unfinanceable? Yeah, I’ve had a few headaches,” Latimer says with a smile. “I’m terribly idealistic, and a surefire way to bankrupt your business is to only rely on your ideals to guide you... It helps that I’m stubborn and determined, and I believe in tiny homes.”