

# Warrior spirit puts Blue Tool Box ahead of the competition



*North Carolina tilesetter puts the focus on constant improvement*

*By Lesley A. Goddin, Editor*

Carlos Castaneda said “The difference between an ordinary man and a warrior is that a warrior takes everything as a challenge, while an ordinary man takes everything as a blessing or a curse.”

Why is this important to a tile contractor? Well, to Kenneth Lambert of Charlotte, N.C.’s Blue Tool Box, it’s his company’s motto, its *raison d’être* or reason for being. And it speaks to the company’s constant drive to increase its quality, from improving dust control during demolition, refining its timeline, improving turn-around time on estimates and following up after the job is complete.

In fact, it’s what Lambert says is what sets the company apart from the competition. “Constantly improving in tile work is so very important, but constantly improving in all areas of the job is what really sets us apart and what is going to push us light years ahead of everyone else in the days ahead.”

He said his company embodies the Carlos Castaneda quote, adding, “The more challenges we overcome, the smaller our competition looks in the rear view.”

Lambert’s career in the tile business was born in challenge. In 2010, in the throes of the recession, he had just been laid off from his job – and his wife moved out four days later, leaving him with no income and a son to care for.

“In the beginning, I was doing odd jobs and anything I could to put bread on the table,” Lambert said. “I remember the first tile job I sold, I took a small deposit, bought a 7” RYOBI tile saw from Home Depot, a trowel and a how-to-tile



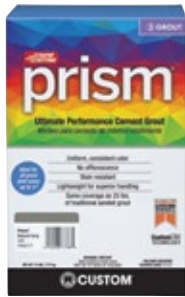
*Kenneth Lambert*

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book. I fell in love with the trade from there, and a few weeks later answered an ad on Craigslist for a tile helper. I worked with him off and on for a year and learned how to lay out a room and the difference between floor mud and thinset."

He discovered he had an eye for tile, a creative edge and the hand-eye coordination to pull it off. Add to that a strong drive. "I not only wanted to be the best but I needed to," he said. He navigated through many challenges – electricity cut off, insurance cancelled, buying an extra blanket when he couldn't afford heat in the winter, but he kept going.

He worked for a year with his mentor-turned-friend, who then decided to leave tile to open a restaurant. Lambert pressed on. His business turned into "something



*Lambert's crew carved this floating, heated bench out of xps foam, and then had to figure out how to hang it on the wall." We put our heads together and came up with a great solution – and the bench is still there three years later," Lambert said.*

that now not only pays my bills but pays the bills for a couple of other families as well, and this is where the story really gets good," he said. "With the talent that's on the team now, we've only scratched the surface. Todd Neubauer is an experienced and talented tile setter who can flick his pinky and make tile magic happen. Joey Chiappetta, who only has a year or so of true tile experience, is dedicated to the craft and catches on to new things so damned fast. He's going to have a great career in the tile industry." Lambert declared, "You're going to see big things come from us over the next few years. Don't blink, because its going to happen fast."

The company is now firmly established in residential, with a few custom commercial jobs thrown in and the occasional remodel, he said. "Our focus is on high-end residential, working directly with homeowners. We plan to continue to grow in this segment. We really enjoy jobs that other contractors can't figure out and take pride in finding solutions for tricky installs."

Lambert is new to NTCA, joining in 2019 "because [tilesetter and CTI evaluator] John Roberts said he was going to send the tile mafia to my house if I didn't," he joked. "John is a great friend and yes, he said I should join but I really joined for the business education



*This steam shower included a custom-built chaise lounge inside that needed to be contoured comfortably to the client's height and body type. Blue Tool Box built a full size mock up out of wood that they tailored to the customer's measurements and preferences before crafting the template and building the final bench out of foam.*

and connections that are available through the NTCA.” Lambert’s company recently experienced a “fall from glory when a couple of contractors got into us for multiple thousands of dollars. It was a really hard hit and we’re still dealing with the effects today,” he said. “I pridefully thought that I could dig myself out of the hole we found ourselves in, but it just felt like I was spinning in circles. I thought that the NTCA might have some great resources for me.

He found what he was looking for. “Jim Olson was kind enough to connect me with some great people who are much wiser and more experienced in business than me,



*This project was an example of how the community came together to make a bathroom accessible for a man who had been involved in a car accident over the summer. Blue Tool Box provided labor, Frank Donahue and Best Tile of Charlotte donated thousands of dollars in tile and setting material, and Sophia Lodge in Salisbury organized a fund raiser to take care of the rest. “It is maybe our proudest moment of the year,” Lambert said. Pictured is Todd Neubauer grouting and Joseph Chiappetta surveying the work.*

and while these relationships are just beginning, I feel that it truly is the beginning of something special and great things are going to come from it," he said.

Though Lambert is not yet a Certified Tile Installer (CTI), he has vowed that his coworkers and he will take and pass the test this year. Here are Lambert's reasons:

1. We want to be part of the effort, raising industry standards. This not only benefits the installer but the homeowner as well.
2. It's silly to produce the quality of work that we do and not have this certification.
3. John Roberts said I had to.
4. After speaking to several CTIs, I

really do see the benefit. I was one of those prideful installers who thought, "I don't need a piece of paper to tell me what I can do." I realize how silly that is now, and know that it has more to do with improving the industry that I love than it has to do with me.

Lambert summed up his work, saying, "The greatest joy for me is the homeowner's happiness. I had a client walk in one time as we were finishing and her eyes filled with tears of joy. She said 'I just can't believe that this is my house.' I don't know how you could ever top the joy and satisfaction that I felt in that moment."



*This was before scribing was cool and popular. The challenge for the bubble tile project was to precut all the field tiles (with lots of core bits and lots of time) to fit the bubble tile that was going in the corner. In the funky drain photo, Todd Neubauer hand scribed the field tile to fit the drain the homeowner bought.*