

Cataraqui Memorials: Transforming countertops into works of art

By Jed Devenish

Imagine a countertop where you can cut, chop, or dice with no cutting board, place hot pots right on it, or spill something on it and it remains exactly the same: untouched, uncompromised and still exhibiting the same beauty and lustre decades down the road.

Is this some kind of Kryptonite-like super-substance? No, it is simple granite, one of the most abundant natural resources on the planet.

Granite is igneous rock composed of feldspar and quartz, with a small amount of mica and minor accessory minerals. Granite crystallizes from magma that cools slowly, deep below the earth's surface. Exceptionally slow rates of cooling give rise to a very coarse-grained variety called pegmatite. Granite, along with other crystalline rocks, constitutes the foundation of the continental masses, and it is the most common intrusive rock exposed at the earth's surface.

Most of all, though, it makes the perfect substance in terms of attractiveness and durability for countertops and many individuals are seeking this material for their home, office, or business. Yet, before it became recognized as the perfect choice for countertops, it was traditionally the best material to utilize in paying tribute to the dearly departed.

This is the setting where Mark Tomlinson first discovered granite.

Granite is now the mandatory material to be used in the making of all memorials in most cemeteries. From large granite monuments to smaller tombstones granite is the substance used. It was in this capacity that Mark Tomlinson developed his skill with granite. After working for various monument-making firms from Newmarket to Kingston, and the subsequent layoff that would come in the slow winter months, Mark decided to start his own business.

In May of 2002 Cataraqui Memorials opened its doors at 1381 Midland Ave. in Kingston. Initially, designing and installing granite countertops was a rarity and the company's focus, as the name suggests, was on memorials. However, that would soon change dramatically.

"I did very few countertops in the beginning," says Mark, who resides in Price Edward County. "Eventually, I had a few people calling asking if I did granite countertops. After a while I got so many calls I decided to start doing them."

In the past two years Mark has seen a 500 per cent increase in the countertop aspect of his business. Last year countertops outsold monuments at a rate of 60 to 40 and Mark expects this gap will widen.

"I figure it is the big housing boom we are seeing right now," says Mark, referring to the increasing demand for granite countertops. "Also, people seem to be willing to spend a little

more on their kitchens and baths than they have in the past meaning they want granite countertops.”

In order to include countertops into the company’s repertoire Mark had to learn a lot along the way and believes he has a knack for the skill required, making the entire countertop appear seamless. “No one wants gaping seams in their countertop and I believe I produce the nicest seams in this area.”

Mark has installed granite countertops in a number of capacities including kitchens and baths for homes, offices, and hotels, as well as on bars, tables and even desks and fireplaces. He uses inch and a quarter and three quarter inch thicknesses of granite and can perform over 20 different styles of edging or profiling. Mark offers a vast array of more than 200 colours and patterns, ensuring each countertop is aesthetically pleasing, unique, elegant, and resilient. Each countertop is cut out of large slabs 10 ft. by 5 ft.

“The colours in granite are unique to the mine from which they came, so new colours are always being discovered and old colours are going extinct leading to the individuality of each countertop,” says Mark.

Just as important as the stylish look that granite offers is its indestructibility. It is virtually impenetrable, and special equipment laced with small diamonds must be used to cut or edge the granite. “Diamonds are the only thing that can cut granite,” says Tomlinson. “Unfortunately, this means that the equipment needed tends to be pretty expensive.”

For example, a single router bit can cost upwards of \$600. These steep costs haven’t deterred Mark. He continues to add pieces of equipment when he can and hopes in the near future to have his own saw to cut the granite himself. The only other substance that can damage granite is granite itself, which makes it such a viable substance in kitchens and baths where wear and tear is more frequent.

While the bulk of Cataraqi’s business is in the Kingston to Belleville area, Mark has gone further including Oshawa and Ottawa. The majority of his customers are through referral so Mark takes great pride in ensuring each customer is more than satisfied. The average project can take a week to design and a full day to install, which is the most challenging part.

“Every customer should see examples of installed work before they ever decide on a company,” expresses Mark adamantly. “Our customers are more than happy to offer their homes to show others the work we have done for them.”

For those that are not a fan of granite, Cataraqi Memorials can also do marble and slate countertops. Marble is softer and more abstract while slate comes in honed or natural cleft. Granite, however, remains the most popular of the three and Mark has pretty much seen it used anywhere including in motor homes and boats.

“It is a very classy, durable product, comparable in price to similar products and occasionally it is even cheaper,” adds Mark.

Mark is happy with the shift in the business and enjoys offering more than just memorials. Things seem to be progressing nicely but this was not always the case. Last August, just before he was to be married, a 1,300 lb. monument fell on his leg, breaking his femur bone. Two days later, after surgery to insert a titanium rod, and driving a wheel chair, Mark got married.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon was short lived as Mark had to be admitted to the hospital the next day after it was discovered he had a fat embolism from the break which almost killed him. He remained in hospital for two weeks and was forced to close the business in the meantime. Once released, ignoring the advice of doctors to rest Mark reopened the store.

“I just had to get back to work,” he emphasizes.

Once back, Mark’s love of the business had increased and he worked doggedly to recover from the weeks the business had been closed. Eventually, after many months of hard work and dedication the business and his life, with his new bride by his side, began getting back to normal again.

It seemed Mark Tomlinson developed a resiliency as strong as the granite he installs.