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by Bobby Vasquez

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Dream Home

Patience, flexibility the foundation to building custom home.

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Photos by Collin Kelly

There's an old saying, "If you want something done, you have to do it yourself." When it comes to building a custom home, Houstonians take this saying to heart. However, the process can be daunting. Without patience, persistence and trust, this American dream can become a nightmare.

When Dean and Marilu Harman began searching for a home in The Woodlands, they found some amenities they wanted, but not all. A design flaw here; an unwanted nook there; great home, bad location; the cons outweighed the pros. When they decided to build the custom home of their dreams, the search was over, but a new journey began. "We knew what we wanted, and when we couldn't find it where we wanted, we decided to do it on our own," Dean Harman says.

With a goal, design and budget in mind, the Harmans were prepared to build from the ground up. They selected their land and agreed upon a design that fit their financial and personal needs, and made best use of their lot. "In the design process, there's a constant tradeoff," he says. "You have your desires and you have your budget." When comparing wants to finances, families often find features they can do without.

The Harmans soon realized they had to do more than hand designs to a trusted general contractor. The couple was at the worksite at least four days per week. "We were surprised with the involvement,"

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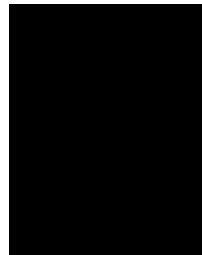
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Harman says. "There were all the big decisions we knew we would have to make, but there were thousands of little decisions. We made sure we were involved and maybe we were too involved." Even so, the Harmans said their level of participation ensured the final product was satisfactory.

However, getting what they wanted proved costly -- in the budget and on the calendar. People building custom homes should be prepared for a hefty commitment in time and money.

Hiring a trusted general contractor alleviates many concerns; he is there to make best use of the budget in the allotted construction time. The Harmans made sure they had open communication with their contractor as they worked through problems. The open communication also emphasized the trust factor. "There are so many opportunities for [a general contractor] to abuse the resources and trust you give them," Harman says. "It is so important that you know from the beginning that the general contractor is trustworthy and ethical." Ensure you are dealing with a reliable, trustworthy contractor by researching firms and reviewing referrals. Agencies, such as the Better Business Bureau, provide background information on many companies, including contractors and home builders. A little research can help you avoid scams and unsatisfactory work.

Also, select a contractor that fits the home's size and budget. If the budget is more than \$1 million (like the Harmans'), then find a general contractor specializing in homes with million-dollar budgets. A contractor without this experience might charge you less; however, they might lose control of the project and cost you time and money. "There are certain expectations for a million-dollar house compared to one [in the six-figure range]," Harman says. "There are going to be higher-end products, materials and design features that won't be in those homes." High-end home contractors have the resources to work through the process and unique problems that arise in multi-million dollar projects. Hiring a contractor whose experience matches expectations eliminates many home-building headaches before they start.

That's not to say the process is perfect, Harman says. No project of this magnitude is without its flaws. Weather, available material and cost, labor, insurance and even rising fuel costs all take a bite out of time and money. "We spent more than what we budgeted," he says. "We had to be flexible as the process wore on and learned to deal with the frustrations as they came about." Therefore, Harman advises to include an additional 20 percent buffer into the project's total budget. For example, if a home is budgeted at a million dollars, then be prepared to spend \$1.2 million. If you don't have the funds to spend more, plan on building an \$800,000 house.

In the end, the Harmans got the 4,600-square-foot home they desired. It has a 270-degree view of a golf course and large, wide-open spaces to fit the needs of their growing family. "When it's all done, you want to get what you pay for, or even something better," he says. "It's your money and your dream, so make sure you voice any concerns you have. It's your home, so it's important to be involved."



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