

## **The Story of a House**

*John Bardsley  
pictures at the bottom*

In the summer of 2003, I set off with my wife, Jen, and our children, Alex and Ellie, on a cross-country drive from Raleigh, North Carolina to Missoula. We had lived in Raleigh for one year, and were returning to Montana because I had gotten my dream job as a math professor at the University of Montana (UM).

When I was offered the job, I was ecstatic. All practical concerns were thrown out the window, and I said yes to the initial offer without thinking twice. ‘The particulars will take care of themselves,’ I thought at the time. ‘We’re going back to Montana. That’s what’s important.’

However, we arrived in Missoula during the tail end of the housing boom with my pre-boom professor’s salary. In the ensuing months, frustration mounted as we looked, in vain, for a home that fit our needs, circumstances, and ideals. By the end of my first semester at UM, we were beginning to wonder if our move to Missoula was really a dream come true after all.

It was at this point that my younger brother Kadin offered to help me build a house. I found the offer extremely attractive. We would not only get a new home in an established neighborhood, near downtown, and at an affordable price, but I would get to help build it.

Just as with my dream job at UM, I jumped at the opportunity without thinking twice, only to later find that my romantic view of things and what would turn out to be reality did not coincide. But then, after five months of looking for a house in Missoula, we’d had enough of reality.

Kadin showed up at our door step in June 2004, ready to get started and heavily laden with all of his belongings, 95% of which were tools. Not long after, we began clearing the lot, and then once the excavation for the foundation and basement were done, we got started on the footings and foundation, on which the entire house would sit.

Concrete is messy and difficult work, especially in the July heat when it sets up fast. Beginners like me can easily become overwhelmed. It’s good to have an expert on hand during such times; you don’t want concrete to dry before you’re ready. Thankfully, Kadin had a handle on it.

With the foundation done, we started framing the house. Framing is straightforward, and I picked it up quickly. Dimensioned lumber is cut exactly to size, and with a tape measure, pencil, straightedge, hand saw, and nail gun, two framers can make fast progress. Within a few weeks, we had the entire structure up and sheeted.

The next things were the windows, siding, and roof. These were all straightforward other than the flat roof sections. We should have hired that part out (it would only have cost a few hundred bucks), but being gluttons for punishment, we gave it a shot ourselves. At one point, on the biggest flat roof section, I had to tear off half of the roofing because we had glued two sections together wrong. That was a bad moment, but we got it right the second time, though not without some of the most stressful moments of the project.

With the outside done, it was time to go in. This coincided with the beginning of the semester and the return to my job at UM. It was the beginning of my second year. You might not be surprised that no one cautioned me against building a house in the

midst of my second year; some things are just too obvious. That semester I split time between my two jobs, working seven days a week throughout.

The trouble with inside work is that it's endless and most of it you don't see in the end: plumbing, wiring, insulation, sheet rock, tape and texture, paint, flooring (wood and tile), finish work, toilets, sinks, kitchen appliances, and cabinets. I'm sure I'm missing some things. We did all of it, except for the carpet at the end. All I did to learn was watch my brother and then start doing it myself; building a house requires about a million simple tasks. My only real failure was the venting for the plumbing. I spent a full day on it and then left for a weekend wedding in October. When I came back, Kadin had torn it out and redone it.

The finish line presented itself during Christmas break, January 2005. By that time I was raw with too much work. After building and installing the cabinets ourselves, the last thing was the installation of the kitchen sink, dishwasher, and stove. It was at this point that Kadin decided to give me a little lesson by turning these tasks over to me completely. He just sat in the living room with a hot cup of tea in hand for days while I seethed and struggled to retro fit the stove and dishwasher so that they worked in the provided space. I got it done, but was pissed as hell. I'm sure Kadin thought it'd build my character, and he was probably right.

I had wanted the experience of building a house, and doing it with my brother made the experience even sweeter. Still, it was more difficult than I could have imagined. 'Be careful what you set your heart upon for you shall surely have it,' said Emerson.

It was worth it, though: I got to spend day after day working with Kadin; I learned just about everything I'll ever need to know about taking care of a house; and I was able to provide a beautiful and affordable home for my family in the great city of Missoula, Montana.

Which reminds me, my wife's job was also a tough one. She was basically a single parent throughout the six months of the construction project, with Kadin and me her third and fourth children. Still, she was able to coordinate the exterior and interior painting with the help of her father, make an infinite number of choices about this and that throughout the project, and she did all of the landscaping on her own. She got what she wanted in the end; I was too tired to argue. But the place looks good, so I don't mind that I left those decisions to her. Building the house was what I really wanted, and I got my wish.



**The garage.**



**Looking east from Scott Street.**



**Looking Northwest from Sherwood Street.**



**Left: My finish work in the master bath. Right: the family room upstairs.**



**Kadin in the living room downstairs.**



**Kitchen shot.**



**The dining area downstairs.**