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House Beautiful: Convenience is critical for blind homeowner

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Upsizing at the age of 91 is not the standard trajectory, but there is nothing standard about Michael A.O. Brodsky.

Last summer, Brodsky's six-year-old guide-dog, Talbot, was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had to be euthanized. While on a waiting list for a new guide dog, Brodsky had to use his white-cane skills, which are not as sharp as they once were. What had been a short walk to the bus stop became a wearisome trek from his townhouse near the Mayfair mall.

Brodsky decided to view the circumstance as an opportunity to find a new home that better suited his needs. He no sooner had the thought, when friends announced they were selling their house. Brodsky made a successful offer, put his townhouse on the market and started packing.

His daughter suggested he get a local moving company to do the packing for him -he is 91, after all, and blind, but he waved off the idea.

"I wouldn't know where anything was if I did that," he explains.

"Easier to pack myself."

Brodsky appreciates his son, daughter and grandchildren, but is determined to maintain his independence and control his own destiny.

"Too much help creates helplessness," he says.

This weekly series takes readers on a tour of outstanding homes in Greater Victoria. Writer Thelma Fayle and award-winning photographer Ted Grant take you inside houses that show off unique architecture and design.

Look for House Beautiful every Saturday in the Times Colonist Homes section.

Within a month of making his decision, Brodsky had moved into the two-bedroom basement suite of his newly acquired 16-year-old, 2,800-squarefoot home, while his friends prepared to move into the house they were building. Having a suite appeals to Brodsky as a potential home-base for a caretaker who might be needed - "when I get old," he says.

Brodsky is not particularly interested in hanging art or painting accent walls or pursuing other common decorating practices. In Brodsky's view, the beauty of his new home is mostly in the ideal functionality it offers.

One of his favorite features is the south-facing sunroom, where he keeps his exercise bike and also a grooming bench set up for the daily care of his new guide dog.

Brodsky does half an hour on the exercise bike and a series of 24 push-ups and sit-ups before breakfast every day. "If I stop for even a few days, I don't feel as good," he says.

Brodsky appreciates the extra-wide kitchen counters that are ideal for kneading bread -he makes his own. His kitchen utensils are neatly

organized and hanging within easy reach and the George Foreman is always on the counter for quick grilling.

As a gourmet cook, he likes to entertain guests from his wide circle of friends. The dining room is perfect for serving shish kebob dinners or chocolate fondues or his famous beef dips.

Fine dining with Brodsky is always guaranteed to be elegant - tablecloth, napkins, the works. Brodsky enjoys doing it all himself.

A computer room, a private patio and yard, a workshop, a heat exchanger and a talking gas fireplace thermostat are just a few of the interesting features in the home originally designed by Victoria Design Ltd. The fruit-filled grapevine and the fig tree in his yard were also factors that seduced Brodsky into his new home-sweet-home.

Brodsky appreciates the spacious living room where he can put his feet up and listen to the three or four talking-books a week he usually enjoys -a tome on Jane Jacobs is the current one. A dedicated CBC fan, Brodsky has a collection of radios positioned around the house. Shelagh Rogers is like a sister, just as Peter Gzowski and Lister Sinclair at one time were like extended family.

Brodsky uses the combination of a sophisticated GPS system and his new guide dog when he heads off on his daily adventures as he gets to know his new Fernwood neighborhood.

His latest profitable discoveries have been the Fernwood Inn for excellent soup and the Cheese Monger on Foul Bay Road, where he can seek out his favorite, Stinking Bishop cheese. Both are places he plans to visit regularly, as he loves good food.

Brodsky is always on the search for new coffee shops and restaurants, although old favorites -such as the Golden Chopsticks on Fort Street or the Fifth Street on Hillside - will continue to be regular stops.

Brodsky volunteered for a variety of agencies, including the Need Crisis Line, the READ society and Toastmasters, where he eventually became the president of a local chapter. As a result, he rarely goes anywhere without encountering old acquaintances.

Brodsky carries pocket size clippers on his daily walks so that when he gets whacked in the face with a protruding branch or bush, he can instantly snip it, rather than trouble the city with a report.

He belongs to a local canoe club, and tries to paddle once a week in nicer weather.

"Age is not an excuse for giving up interests," he says.

After a successful military career, Brodsky retired to Victoria and within a year, he went blind suddenly at age 54. The doctor said his sight might recover in 10 days, but it never did.

"Eventually, I was stubborn enough to discover that I could still have fun." That was almost 40 years ago, and Brodsky is still having fun. For Valentine's Day, he put on an elegant dark blue suit, white shirt and mauve tie and went out for dinner with his best lady friend, retired teacher and writer Betty Funk. He presented her with a large, striking bouquet of pink gerbera daisies. Betty loved them.

"I live as though I were going to live forever, though I know very well I won't," he says.

Mike Brodsky is living well, beautifully in fact, and enjoying his new Fernwood home -and at 91 is a role model for all of us.

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