

Building a life by building houses

Immigrant started his business with nothing but will and desire

By Lloyd Kam Williams
Special Writer

Roman Barsky, a master builder who specializes in creating new houses that fit in seamlessly with their older Princeton neighbors, arrived in this country in 1978 at the age of 17. His family had emigrated from Russia with the hope of obtaining the most advanced medical care for his father, who was suffering from cancer. Unfortunately, his father's condition only worsened. And so Roman, 17 and still adapting to a new country, became the family breadwinner, supporting his mother and younger brother.

Mr. Barsky and his family started life in this country in a Russian community in Newark, where he found work in construction. He soon met and married a woman from his homeland, and moved to Central Jersey so that she could pursue her college degree while he pursued his dream of owning his own home building business.

Mr. Barsky has realized that dream, and he now builds \$350,000 to \$450,000 homes in the Princeton area, overseeing all phases of the process. "I am not the type of builder who likes to just follow a plan," Mr. Barsky said. "I enjoy the whole process of picking the land, purchasing it, designing the house and then building it. And I like to build a house that I would live in myself."

Recently, he has completed homes on Mount Lucas Road and on Cuyler Road in Princeton Township. Presently he is building a house on Moore Street in Princeton Borough and another on Harris Road in the township. In the pipeline, he is awaiting approval for several sites, including one on Pine Street in the borough.

How long does it take to complete a house?

"It depends on approvals," he cautioned. "I buy empty pieces of property and build from scratch. I can tell you that from the day I start the house to finish takes about three or four months. But sometimes, the approvals alone might take six months."

Why Princeton?

"Princeton reminds me of many cities in Europe. It has a downtown with nice neighborhoods in walking distance. So, I personally love to build here, because there's a great deal of charm in Princeton. But there's not much land left and so the parcels are often undersized, and so I often have to wait for a variance."

When do you sell a house you're working on?

"I try not to market them until I'm halfway finished," Mr. Barsky said. "For instance, the houses I'm working on now, won't even be on the market until I reach a certain stage. I specialize in maintenance-free houses, and I construct with no materials that rot. The houses don't require painting. The owners won't have to do anything to the houses after they move in, except cutting the grass."

Why maintenance-free houses?

"Because Princeton is a town of many professionals who usually work longer hours. They don't want to be involved in repairs and upkeep."



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

Russian immigrant Roman Barsky came to America at the age of 17 and slowly created a business specializing in building custom homes in the Princeton area.

What else sets your houses apart?

"Well I always use extra-large windows," he said, "so you can tell one of mine from the outside. Inside, my houses are marked by open space, with large kitchens, tall cabinets and a lot of crown moldings. But basically, I try to build a house that fits the character of its neighborhood, one which looks old, but which is brand

new. When people pass by a house I've just finished, I want them to think that it's been there for ages." "What part of the work do you do?" "I hire contractors but I am there, overseeing everything, and I am constantly involved with each detail." "How long do your houses usually take to sell?" "About a month or two." "You love you work so much. Are you sad to see them go?" "I miss them in a sense, when I go for a ride with my family we'll often get a little out of our way to pass by a

my plumber only does plumbing..." That way, I get the best workmanship."

Does your wife, Emma, help you?

"Of course. I value her input as to the design because, basically, the woman buys the house, not the man. When we do the layout, therefore, Emma is critical, because we're concerned first with deferring to a woman's sensibility." At this point in the interview, Mr. Barsky called on his better half, who bubbled over with enthusiasm.

"I just want to tell you," she began, "that my husband is a superb builder. He gives his heart and his soul to every project. He is one of those lucky people who loves his work. I don't know too many people who get up in the morning happy to go to work. That's the reason for his success."

"He works seven days a week and the phone doesn't stop ringing. He is shy, and wouldn't boast, but as his partner in life and in business, it is almost my obligation to tell you how well-respected he is in town. All the neighbors love him, because he'll help them out at the drop of a hat." Her eyes welled up.

"He has superb taste. He does everything with heart and he takes a lot of pride in his work. When we got married, we had absolutely nothing, but his will and his desire."

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So you put your all into each house.

"Of course, of course. I'm climbing ladders, inspecting materials, and doing a great deal myself to ensure that everything is done right. I'm always on the job, and if something doesn't meet my standards, I re-do it myself, because I'm working alongside my subcontractors."

Why do you use so many subcontractors?

"You get better quality of work from a person who does one thing all day long. My roofer only does roofs,