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CLIENT: Mary Beth Wagner **BUILDER:** Mark Danuser, Tatum Brown Custom Homes **THE PROJECT:** New construction in the Park Cities

We sold our previous home unexpectedly. We had a party at our house and a real estate agent friend of ours called us afterward and said, “Would you consider selling your house?” and that she had somebody in mind.

When it came time to look, I knew we’d stay in the Park Cities, where our previous home was. I grew up here, and I had a really good experience, and I wanted that for my kids.

We decided to build because we wanted to be able to create the spaces we felt we needed for our family, and we had trouble finding them in existing homes. We wanted an upstairs playroom and laundry, an outdoor living space that felt more like an extension of the house rather than just a covered porch, and a big front yard where the kids could play. Plus, being a designer myself, I knew I wanted to put my own personal stamp on it.

We had done small kitchen and bath remodels in the past, but we’d never built a home from scratch. At one point, we thought we were going to build and didn’t, and at the time, somebody had told us about Tatum Brown. This time around, I saw a house of Mark Danuser’s that I liked, so I called him up and met with him at one of his properties. I really liked the quality of the finish-out of his homes. It wasn’t just your run-of-the-mill stuff.

We met with several builders, but with Mark, we had an instant connection. You want to make sure your personalities mesh, because you’ll be working with that person for 12 months, if not longer. When you meet, ask who’s going to be in charge on your job. Is it going to be the builder himself? A project manager? Another contractor? Is that person going to be there the whole time, or are they going to leave and go on to other jobs?

Referrals are important, too. It’s good to have known somebody—whether it’s personally or a reference from the builder—who’s had experience with that builder and has nice things to say. Do your research and find out things like: Do they stay on budget? If they go over budget, how much? People get reputations for that. Ask clients if the



builder stuck to what they quoted in terms of a timeline. Things can run over, and most people expect that when building, but you want it to stay for the most part on track.

Mark really stuck with the timeline, and I think a lot of that has to do with how organized his team was. Mark has someone in place for everything. They also provide a client-personalized website you can log onto and see the progress. They had everything cataloged, and every time there was a change order, I signed off on it. I work on a lot of projects with builders, and it isn’t always so smooth.

In our case, we worked most frequently with our project manager, Rick. I talked to or saw him just about daily, but Mark met with us almost every Friday. During the construction process, I think it’s good to go by the house almost every day, just to be aware of what progress they’re making, so there aren’t any surprises.

I would tell anyone considering building to take their time when working with their architect so they’re not having to change things once the framing goes up. Still, our team was able to help us reconfigure some things, like our courtyard, that weren’t going to work with how the architect had designed it. We weren’t really sure how it was going to come together, but now it’s most people’s favorite part of the house.

Also, when your builder gives you timelines for making selections, stay within them! People put it off, but the client needs to stay on track so they’re not screwing up the builder’s ordering dates. It can be really overwhelming making all those decisions—every decision you makes affects another one. I changed my mind a couple of times, and our builder was always great about it. They would say, “Come in, let’s have a meeting and lay everything out.” They have a brand-new, gorgeous office where they have different counter-top selections or different materials and edge details you can look at if you’re trying to make a decision. Morgan, the designer at Tatum Brown, definitely helped on decisions I was feeling overwhelmed with. It was nice that I could trust them with things like that.

We were anticipating construction taking a year, but we finished in around nine months. I think that’s partly because I stuck with most of my decisions and I kind of knew what I wanted, but we just didn’t have any hiccups. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it.