Coming Home Again

by Blythe Thimsen
photos by Alan Bisson

They say you can’t go home again, but apparently John Hieber didn’t get the memo. Last November, he and his wife, Debbie, happily moved into the same home his parents built when he was a child, and in which he grew up. Of course, there were a few changes here and there, compliments of an extensive remodel project which took their house from 1950’s modern to current day stunner. “When we first moved in, I had reservations about living in the same house I grew up in,” says John, “but when it was finished, it had such a new feel, I’ve never again had reservations.”

The house was built on the edge of the Manito Golf Course in 1953, for John’s parents by their friend, Warren Heylman. While the name may not be familiar, his work certainly is. Heylman is the local architect who brought a modern look to his projects, including the Parkade, the Spokane Regional Health District building, and the Spokane International Airport. Modern houses, though, were not common at the time. In fact, when the Hieber house was originally built, it was so rare, it drew attention from afar, landing a photo spread in the February 12, 1956 Los Angeles Times Home magazine.
John’s parents continued to live in the house until his father passed away, four years ago, and his mother passed away, two years ago. Not wanting to let the house and its great lot go, John and Debbie decided to move in, but knew they would need to do some updating.

“When we moved into the house after John’s mother passed away, the house had white carpet,” says Debbie. “In my mind, all I wanted was new carpet and a new dishwasher, and it would have been fine.”

“They wouldn’t have been fine,” interjects Teresa Jordan, a designer at United Floor Covering who helped create the design and style of the Hiber’s home. “They love to entertain and this new open floor plan is perfect for entertaining.”

“We had met Teresa, and then within no time, she was telling us ‘well you could do this and this and this,’ says Debbie. With a few of the ideas taking root in the Hiber’s minds, the full-scale project was off and running.

“That is what took it from being the house that John grew up in, to being John and Debbie’s new house,” says Teresa, of the design and décor decisions that were made and the changes that were incorporated into the home.

When John and Debbie were referred to architect Kevin McKee to help on the project, it was a dream come true for McKee, who had admired their house ever since he moved to Spokane several years ago. At one point, he had
even left a note on the front door, stating that if the homeowners were ever interested in selling the house, he’d like to know. “I didn’t want it to be offensive, but I always liked the house so much,” he says. Imagine his surprise when he met the Hiebers and discovered the house they wanted him to remodel was the very house he had long admired.

“The main thing I said, when I first walked through the house, was that they should clear it all out,” says McKee of his vision for the home, which was originally broken into small rooms. “The goal was to try to keep the footprint, but bring it up to 2010, keeping it contemporary. John was a little hesitant at first, but I knew to open it up, the view would be so dramatic.”

After convincing the Hiebers to open up the walls, McKee had another bombshell idea. He suggested they move the garage forward and put in a master suite where the original garage was located, on the back of the house. “Halfway through, Kevin saw there was a real need to take advantage of the view of the golf course,” says John. “He asked, ‘why is the car getting the best view?’”

“The greatest challenge in doing this was making sure we didn’t screw up the integrity of the design,” says McKee. “We had to make sure the bones of the house looked the same.” The original design is based on an H floor plan, separating the bedrooms (one side of the H) from the communal living area (the other side of the H), with an entryway hall and courtyards between the two sides of the letter.

John and Debbie lived in the house while remodeling it, which was done in three phases: the home’s original, mid-century modern furniture was kept, but was given an updated look with new upholstery. The original brick wall and fireplace were kept.
the front bedrooms, the main living area and finally, the addition of the master suite. They even slept on a mattress in what is now the open dining room area, and at one time had a makeshift kitchen in the entryway. "I don’t think we ever complained," says Debbie of their cramped life during the remodel. "We knew what was coming, and that it was just going to be one year of our lives."

In addition to working with McKee and Jordan, the Hiebers entrusted their home to the capable hands of their builder, Daryl Brown. "Everyone worked well together, beyond well, really, for the year," says Debbie of all the team members who worked on the house. This teamwork proved essential when, midway through the remodel, tragedy struck when John and Debbie’s daughter, Alyson, died of complications arising from her long battle with bulimia, in September 2009, at the age of 22. "I just went into a zone," says Debbie, who suddenly didn’t have the focus or heart to pick wall tiles or paint colors in light of what had happened. "Teresa would come up with two or three ideas, and give them to John to decide."

Gradually, Debbie was able to pour herself into the project, realizing it was a process that came with plenty of challenges that demanded their attention and kept their minds busy. "Everything in this house was antiquated," says John, listing one of the challenges. "The more we got into it, the more we realized it all needed to be redone." There were broken seals, single pane windows, no insulation in the roof, the roof leaked, the electrical was outdated and there was no air conditioning, which made the house like an oven in the summers. Come winter though, the house lost all of its heat out of the single pane windows and broken seals. "His mom’s heating bills was $800 per month,"

Granite countertops continue down the sides of the cabinets in the kitchen, protecting the sides from wear and tear by the Hiebers two dogs.

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sues Debbie.

With the completed remodel, long gone are $800 per month heating bills. Now the house is energy efficient and visually impressive to all who enter through the metal gate in the front courtyard and follow the dimensional walkway into the center of the H footprint of the home. The walkway ends at a glass door that leads into the entryway, connecting the two sides of the H shaped home.

Heading off of the entryway, to the left, is the original bedroom side of the H shaped floor plan, with a bedroom, bathroom and office. The office, or “man room” as it is now dubbed, was John’s childhood bedroom. Furnished in lush leather furniture, a big screen TV and directional lighting, this is a comfortable office from where John now runs his business. Light filters in through a high bank of windows along the upper edge of the wall, as well as through a large picture window on the other side of the room that looks onto the inner courtyard.

The bathroom on this side of the house has two original skylights, which was unheard of in 1953, and the original square bathtub and tiles; a new granite counter and toilet were added to bring a modern style to the room.

The bedroom on this front wing of the house was the original master bedroom, and where John and Debbie envisioned themselves living before the master suite was added. This original bedroom has access to a private courtyard, through a sliding glass door, and includes features that were considered cutting edge when the house was originally built. An example is the 16 drawer built-in wood...
The master suite was built where the home’s original garage stood, allowing for the best views in the house to be found in this room. bureau, which makes up the exterior wall on the front of the house, and eliminates the need for furniture, thus keeping the lines of the room clean. A bathroom off of this bedroom has a sunken bathtub located below floor level, which is a rare find, even today.

Back in the foyer, two steps lead up into the living section of the house. Where there were once small, closed off rooms, there is now one large open space, seamlessly blending the living room, kitchen and dining room. Making it feel even larger is the nearly all-windowed back wall. In this house, the outside plays as much of a role as does the inside, with the view an integral part of the house.

The living room’s center focal point is the original large brick fireplace wall that caps the end of the length of the house. The living room spills over into the designer kitchen, separated only by the granite seating area.

“I was very aware of the dogs, with a wood floor,” says Theresa, of the Hiebers’ two German Shorthairs, Molly and Lucy, who are ruling members of the family. “I was also nervous about putting in a light floor with the dark ceiling.” The solution was to select a dark slate floor that balanced the color, but also could withstand the pounding of eight dog paws all day long, and not show any wear and tear.

“We also knew the dogs would ruin the sides of the wood cabinets,” says Theresa, “so we decided to build it out of granite because it gave it more personality.” The granite extends off of the countertops and slides down the ends of the counter, creating a granite cap over the wood cabinets.

In the kitchen, all of the storage and appliances were kept below the counters, leaving everything above the counter open for unobstructed views out the window and into the back yard and the golf course beyond.

A beer and wine fridge sits below the counter along with a pull out drawer dishwasher, while a DCS Fisher & Paykel six-burner gas range occupies one side of the kitchen, and the stainless steel exterior of it is mirrored in the center island, which is paneled in stainless steel.

“We really do have a lot of company and entertain a lot, and no one is crowded in the kitchen,” says Debbie.

Off of the kitchen is one of several outdoor sitting areas, surrounding an outdoor cooking and dining area. Another DCS Fisher & Paykel grill is located out here, but with both propane...
and natural gas piped in, it is less barbecue pit and more outdoor kitchen. For those days when a barbecue is needed, John uses the built-in Big Green Egg barbecue, a cult favorite among barbecue aficionados.

Whether cooked in the Big Green Egg, or on the grill, enjoying a meal on the outdoor terrace is always delightful, thanks to the beautifully landscaped yard and impressive view directly onto the golf course.

“My dad wanted to be next to the golf course; he felt it was a long-term investment,” says John of the home’s location on the Manito Golf Course. When the home was originally built, it was the third house on what is now a fully developed block.

John and Debbie can access the golf course easily, by just driving out their back gate onto the course.

Molly and Lucy pose next to their bronzed likenesses on the pavers in one of the center courtyards.
the course. A set of turf stones lead from the backside of the garage across the grass, allowing for the golf cart to be driven on this path without wearing down the pristine lawn. The beauty of the backyard is something that has been cultivated over the last year.

“There were 50-year old shrubs, five feet tall, against a cyclone fence,” says John, describing the remnants of the home’s original landscaping. “The whole patio was cracked and beyond disrepair. Last summer it was all a dirt pile, and the pool was about ready to be filled in with dirt.” The pool was salvaged though, and after some repair work, along with an impressive landscaping overhaul, the backyard is an oasis.

The foyer connects the two sides of the house. Entrances on both sides of the foyer open into two different courtyards.
“The entertainment value they have has made it a great investment for them,” says Casey Sumpton of All About Landscaping, the genius behind the beautifully landscaped yard. Sumpton used sandwashed concrete for the walkways, and plenty of lights to create ambience for night or while entertaining. Two waterfalls in back of the planters along the far edge of the pool re-circulate water, creating a relaxing sound, but also refilling the pool when necessary.

From the dining room, back inside the house, the landscaped yard is a permanent accessory to the clean lined modern furniture that fills the room. The original furniture that John’s parents purchased for the house matched the style of the home perfectly – so perfectly in fact, John and Debbie knew they shouldn’t mess with a good thing. Instead, they had all of the furniture refinished and reupholstered, bringing a modern, polished look to the furnishings. This includes the dining room table, which seats eight.

With a wall of windows on the south side of the dining room looking into the inner entrance courtyard, and the windows on the northside opening out onto the outdoor kitchen and dining area, the space is well-lit and could potentially get cold on a winter day. That is why a freestanding fireplace unit has been incorporated into the corner.

If it is warmth you are looking for, though, head for the master suite addition, located at the end of the main length of the house. Here, the cool hard slate floors are replaced by lush rich carpeting. A walk-through closet is visible immediately upon opening the double door entrance to the suite. Walking through the spacious closet takes you through a water closet, into the main portion of the bathroom. A deep, infinity tub is set into the corner by a picture window that provides privacy as well...
as stunning views of the golf course, all at once. A flat screen TV on the wall provides all the more reason to keep the hot water coming, and soak in the tub! For those who want a faster approach to bathing, the deep walk-in shower with five showerheads should do the trick.

Exiting out of the bathroom into the bedroom, your eyes are drawn to the floor to ceiling windows flanking double doors that open out onto a private patio with a seating area that curls around to the pool.

“It is very peaceful,” says Debbie, reflecting on life in their home. “You see life going on, around you and on the course, but it is peaceful here. This is so much nicer then we ever imagined it would be.”

Two hundred guests will get a first-hand look at how nice the finished home truly is, when they gather for the first annual Alyson Hieber Memorial Fundraiser, benefiting the Inland Northwest Coalition on Eating Disorders (INCED), a group John and Debbie helped start. Partnering with the Manito Golf Club, the Hiebers are putting on this event as a way to remember and honor their daughter, and to educate people about the disease that took her life.

Through the heartbreaking journey on which John and Debbie traveled with Alyson, the original pool was refurbished and maintained as part of the stunning backyard.
they discovered that, “Spokane doesn’t have resources for patients with eating disorders. It is considered such a shameful disease,” says Debbie. “There is no place in Spokane to take care of people over age 18 with this disease. Our goal is to bring attention to eating disorders.”

“We’re going to try to help develop resources for people with this disease, because it is a huge problem,” says John of their reason for opening their home to this event. Guests will enjoy a champagne and cocktail hour at the Hieter home, featuring a great selection of Washington wine, champagne and hors d’oeuvres. A longest drive contest will take place on the 18th hole of Manito Country Club, before guests take golf carts over to the clubhouse for dinner, dancing and a reception at Manito Country Club.

“I felt it started as a project of heartbreak, but now it is a project of joy,” says United Floor Covering’s Teresa Jordan, of the house, and of how far, personally, John and Debbie have come during the remodel of their home. Throughout the remodel of their lives and their home, one great lesson has been learned along the way: no matter how far you go, you can always go home.”