

# Brooks & Brian's ADU:

## Retirement Plan for Mom & Us

*Editor's Note: This post is an extended case study from the AARP VT [Is There an ADU in Your Retirement Plan 2-Pager](#) published in 2022. The other posts are [Amy Magyar's ADU: Friend Next Door & Nest for Me](#) and [Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU: Inspiration for the Neighborhood](#). Also, check out [10 Ways Your ADU Can Support Your Retirement](#).*

Lina Menard



*Brooks & Brian's Attached ADU & Primary Dwelling*

## Quick Facts

- Owner Names: Brian & Brooks
- City & State: Burlington, VT
- Designer Name: Brian
- Builder Name: [DC Construction](#)
- Year Built: 2018
- Approx Square Footage: 600
- Approx Cost: \$140,000
- ADU Type: carve-out plus addition

Brian first became aware of ADUs through his professional career in real estate. He has helped clients purchase and sell properties with ADUs so he recognized the value of having an ADU for housing flexibility, income potential, and accommodation of extended family situations.

When Brian and his wife Brooks began talking with her mother about her next housing situation at the age of 88, they discussed the possibility of her moving in with them. As they explored various options, they determined that an ADU would be the best option for both generations: an ADU would enable Brooks' mother to retain as much independence as possible while having family close by. It would also create additional housing flexibility for Brian and Brooks for the long-run.

They considered different permutations and eventually landed on a design that included utilizing one of the first floor bedrooms of the house in combination with an addition. Brian explains: "It seemed the best way for her to live with us but keep her independence. We would just add onto the house to make it work."

One of the key design considerations was integrating a one-story addition with their existing home. Their home is a classic Cape, so it had a low-slung profile anyhow, but Capes are simple rectangles in their footprint, so the addition could look out-of-place if not done thoughtfully. It was set back a few feet with a bit smaller scale, as is classic in any cape design.



*Brooks & Brian's Home with Attached ADU*

“I’m a purist,” Brian says. “So making it look like it was part of the original construction, making it fit in, was important to me. The house now has an extension on the side of it, but we wanted to make it look like the addition had been there forever.”

Brooks and Brian didn’t want to lose light from the windows on the second story of the house, where their master bedroom was, so they turned the upper window into a door and had a porch added on top of the addition with a classic railing, to make it look original to the house.



*Brooks & Brian's ADU with Kitchenette, Bed Nook & Living*

Sustainability was also a consideration for Brooks and Brian. When they repurposed one of their four bedrooms to create part of the ADU, the windows they removed were used on the new side of the ADU, further out from the original plane of the house. They were also conscientious of energy-efficiency, choosing a spray foam insulation to maximize their R-value and installing a heat pump for heating and cooling.

Accessibility was another important factor in the design of Brooks and Brian's ADU. The ADU is basically a 15' by 15' bedroom and an additional 15' x 15' sitting room plus a bathroom, keeping circulation simple. They used three-foot doors for the exterior door, the door to the bathroom, and the door that connects the ADU to the main house. They installed grab bars in the bathroom as part of the construction of the ADU. They also reduced the number of steps from grade to the exterior door to 2. They had a ramp made that could be clipped on but never needed to use it.

Brooks' mother had to downsize dramatically because she was in a much larger home. Brian and Brooks' focused on providing storage within the ADU in all the strategic spots that it would be needed: a walk-in closet, adequate kitchen storage, and even a closet in the bathroom. Luckily, Brooks and Brian had a full basement in their primary dwelling, so some of her treasures went there. It gave Brooks and her mother some time to go through boxes of family items and memorabilia and to sort things out slowly over a few years.

For Brian and Brooks the highlight of having their ADU is that it enabled Brooks' mother to be with them for three years. Brooks' mother passed away in the fall of 2021, so as of this writing, Brian, Brooks and their ADU are still in transition.

*“She had a great quality of life living in the ADU. We had just become empty nesters, so my wife was happy to be able to help her Mom in this time of transition. It gave Brooks a great sense of purpose, being the primary caretaker for her Mom. It was very easy having her there and though it was certainly more hands-on for my wife, it worked well for all of us.”*

- Brian

Brian notes that since Brooks' father passed away many years ago, Brooks' mother had lived alone for almost 50 years. She was used to living alone and had lots of hobbies, and numerous close friends nearby. Brian says “it would have been a very different dynamic” if Brooks' mother wasn't so independent and hadn't lived on her own for so long before joining us.”



*Brooks & Brian's ADU Bed Nook & Living*

In the last six months of her life, Brooks' mother's health began to decline and she needed more "hands-on" help throughout the day. However, she still maintained more independence than she would have in other housing situations.

*"Generally I'd go to work around 7:00 or 7:30 a.m. Brooks' mom would 'emerge' around 8:00 - 9:00 a.m. Then she and Brooks would have coffee, watch the morning news shows, make breakfast and many days, part ways until early evening. Brooks' mom would fill her day walking the dog, reading, playing bridge online or going out with friends. She'd have dinner with us four to five nights a week, but otherwise was living independently about 85% of the time."*

- Brian

As of this writing, Brooks and Brian's ADU is being used as a guest suite, which they're finding particularly helpful during the Covid-19 pandemic. Brian explains "it was a four-bed house and when we took that bedroom out we were down to three bedrooms and ADU. We have

four adult children and a large extended family, so it's a really nice separate 'escape' space when the house is filled up!"

Brian and Brooks see lots of possible ways their ADU could be used in the future to benefit them and their family.

*"If we ever needed to live on one level, the ADU could be our master bedroom and allow for one-level living. The plumbing is set up behind the small kitchen so it can be a laundry facility, since it is now located in the basement. We had the kitchen set back into the wall so it can become a closet with doors if the laundry is moved there. Also my brother-in-law and his wife live in California and they are close to retirement age. So we've been discussing different options with them. Maybe they come for a month or two in the summer and they rent our ADU for a nominal rent while renting out their place in California. It would be a win-win all around. It's really nice to have that flexibility as your needs change and life happens. At different points in our life it will serve different purposes: providing space for extra family and one-level living if ever needed (temporarily or permanently) or generating income down the road to cover property taxes, etc."*

-Brian



*Brooks & Brian's ADU Living, Bed Nook & Kitchenette*

Brooks explains that the ADU helped her mother live more independently during her final years and while neither Brian and Brooks are retired, they're considering how the ADU may be part of their retirement plan, too.

*“One of the issues here in Burlington is that the property taxes are high. We have a large lot with a great view of the lake so our taxes reflect that. If we can rent the ADU as we get older and are on a fixed income, it would enable us to stay in the house longer. That is a big reason Burlington is trying to adjust the rules and regulations and be flexible, making ADUs more doable, especially on smaller city lots. ADUs can help people stay in their homes, live more comfortably in familiar surroundings and stay close to family, friends and neighbors. Studies show that older people stay healthier and more active when living independently in their home as long as they can, within reason. So we may rent it out, but haven't gotten there yet. We've just refurnished it. Brooks' mom's furnishings were distributed to family members, so it was a nice time to give it a fresh, more contemporary look. It*



*also has helped the kids and grandchildren. It is not “Grandma’s space” anymore. It seems to have made it easier for them to embrace that “new” space and enjoy it. We’ve already had neighbors and friends inquiring if it’s for rent. We like the idea of having someone we know in that space and that is certainly preferred over strangers.”*

- Brian

So what advice do Brian & Brooks have for someone considering creating an ADU on their own property?

*“I’ve seen ADUs that are not well thought out and don’t really fit in with the existing structure. Sometimes you’ll see a charming old house with a super contemporary building towering over it in the back. I don’t care if the house is contemporary or traditional, but my personal take is that the ADU should look like it fits in and was always part of the landscape. Some people like juxtaposition. So make it look like it’s always been there on the exterior, and then be creative and funky on the interior.”*

- Brian