Marty Davis, 46, is a self-employed contractor who not only builds others’ homes with his brother, but has been constructing a home for himself and his wife, Ruth, in Massachusetts. In his job, Davis frames houses, builds walls, hangs shingles, and sets up scaffolding and beams. Unlike many in his profession, however, Davis hones his construction skills with only one arm.

In April 2006, after a lengthy search, the Davises purchased a piece of land, the future site of their home, with plans to build the house the following spring. One year earlier, Davis had had carpal tunnel surgery on his left wrist, which gradually improved over the course of the year. However, at the time they purchased the property, his fingers were becoming numb again, and his index finger was permanently immobile and unusable.

Davis scheduled an appointment with his doctor, who discovered what he thought was a benign tumor in his forearm. Davis’ doctor arranged a routine surgery to remove the tumor, but on the day of the surgery, he discontinued the operation because the tumor resembled sarcoma. His lab results confirmed the prognosis, and lab results indicated he had epithelioid sarcoma – a rarer form of an already-rare sarcoma. Davis began radiation treatment, and, a couple of months later, underwent another surgical procedure to remove the remaining tumor and one of the two arteries that ran to his hand. The procedure was successful, allowing Davis to recapture use of all of his fingers.

He recovered gradually, returning to work while seeing an occupational therapist regularly. During one of his occupational therapy sessions, a lump was discovered on Davis’ left arm above his elbow. An MRI revealed that his sarcoma had resurfaced. This time, however, the cancer had wrapped around the remaining artery in his hand.
Davis had only one option: amputation above the elbow. His surgery went well, and he met with prosthetists while he was recuperating in the hospital. In the meantime, Davis began adjuvant chemotherapy, which required a 5-day hospital stay per treatment for six different cycles. The chemotherapy drained him of any energy, and its side effects were debilitating. The construction of his house was postponed indefinitely.

Davis, still desiring to build his own home, sought out his doctor’s advice, who told him to “just do it.” And Davis did just that. Ground was broken in May 2008, and he completed nearly all of the work by himself with just one arm.

He did, however, sometimes require the help of others. Some tasks were too difficult for him to complete by himself, including hanging kitchen cabinets, which make his work challenging at times.

“It’s frustrating because what used to take 30 seconds to do with two hands now will take 10 times as long with one hand,” Davis explains. “And I always have to think of different ways to accomplish things.”

Ruth Davis says the house design needed only a bit of modification to accommodate her husband’s missing arm. “The only thing we did differently, and it came up as he was doing the finish work, was the door knobs,” says Ruth. “Rather than the traditional round knobs, we are using the lever-type ones. That way, if he is holding something in his existing hand, he can still open the door using his residual limb.”

In October 2008, things were looking up, and Davis returned to work with his brother. The following week, however, he found a lump in his residual limb. His sarcoma had mercilessly returned.

Davis began a different kind of chemotherapy – one that was more compatible with his active lifestyle – with drugs that caused milder side effects.

“Instead of being in bed for a day or two after treatment, I could go right back to work. Sometimes I would take the afternoon off after a double day of treatment, but I usually just returned to working on the house,” Davis says. Davis’ profession is as necessary as it is cathartic.

“After an amputation, it is important to know that you can do your job, because it is essential for day-to-day living,” Davis explains. “But my job is more than a necessity. It keeps my mind off the everyday worries of cancer, because I never know if it’s going to come back again. I’ve learned to appreciate every minute.”

Still, Davis’ doctors push him to continue the chemotherapy as long as he can tolerate it, because the cancer can always reappear.

Davis is currently finishing their home and hopes to complete it within the next few weeks. He recently painted the house, put up kitchen cabinets, installed trim and did the plumbing and wiring himself.