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SOFA, so good

Love is a driving force behind this downtown institution

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Cynthia Brick, in the store she and husband Fred Brick run at 145 Market Ave., has been fascinated by fine furniture since her youth. After 41 years in the business she loves, she has no plans of giving up.

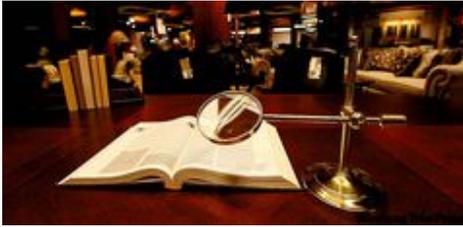
Maybe it was the way the varnished wood glistened in a storefront window, or the way the gold-textured knobs shone in the light. Whatever it was, there was something about fine furniture that made Cynthia Brick fall madly in love.

"In my youth, when my friends and I would go down to Eaton's, they would be upstairs looking at all the clothes and I would be downstairs looking at the fine furniture," says Brick, founder and co-owner of Brick's Fine Furniture Ltd., a business she runs with her husband, Fred Brick. "I didn't realize it then, but this was what I wanted to do."



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Brick got her wish in 1969. Fred was working as a bookkeeper for a local store when his boss suddenly died. There were three young children to feed, and their father was jobless. "It was scary," Brick says. "He was suddenly out of work, so my husband and I decided we'd like to go into the furniture business."

Their first store was at 288 Princess St. It was a second-floor location with expensive rent. This left the Bricks with barely any money to buy furniture. To add to their small furniture inventory and help present a full-looking display floor, the Bricks teamed up with a local company to warehouse and ship caskets. "We got about \$350 for each," says Cynthia. "We lined them up in the store, and we'd tell people that they were triple dressers." Slowly and surely, their business seemed to grow into something closer to what they had imagined when Cynthia began taking customers to local manufacturers to help them pick out their pieces.

Nowadays, the business is a downtown institution, but the Bricks know it took a lot of perseverance, especially as they endured hit after hit. In 1976, their Princess Street location was suddenly bought out and the Bricks were left out on the street. Even after finding a new, and much more expensive, Lombard Avenue location, another even bigger issue arose when national furniture chain The Brick came tromping into Manitoba in 1987.

"They wanted us to stop using our name," says Brick, "but my husband believed the only thing you can leave this world with is your good name, and we weren't going to let somebody take it away from us." The five-year lawsuit ended with a \$180,000 legal bill and an agreement the two companies could co-exist.

Brick says the determination that runs through the couple sprouted from the neighbourhood they grew up in. "Let me tell you something about the North End: We all try harder," she says with pride. "We weren't spoon-fed so you bloody well had to make it happen for yourself."

After all the years of financial trouble, you'd think the business and their marriage would have suffered, but Cynthia says their commitment to their company and each other remained intact. "We were determined to support the other one," she says. "We were the only two people who believed we could make it happen."

The two met at a local dance in Winnipeg when Cynthia was 17. She disliked her date and decided to work her moves on 22-year-old Fred instead. "The guy I was supposed to be stuck with was short and not very good-looking," she says with a laugh. "Fred sat beside me, so I figured I might as well be here with him." Even though Fred had his own date, she was undeterred. "I didn't care about the other girl he was supposed to be with, I was going to do my number." And their relationship soon began.

They wed in 1960.

During their 50-year marriage and 41-year career in the furniture business, the two weathered storms that may have caused others to give up. But even at the age of 70, Brick says there's nothing that could make her throw in the towel. "I love what I do. The thought of retirement is a really horrible thought to me," she says. "I want to keep working. I want to keep being challenged and I want to keep having fun doing it."

Brick's Fine Furniture is more than just a business; to Brick, it's her hobby. "This is a grown-up version of a playhouse," she says. "I'm constantly rearranging, putting accessories out, and that's what it's all about. It's wonderful." Since her love for her job runs so deep, it's no surprise you can see her at the current Brick's Fine Furniture location working with customers every day.

Their newest store location at 145 Market Ave. is her home away from home, one that she loves despite the bad rap the downtown sometimes gets. "I believe the downtown is important," she says. "I think the heart of the city has to be kept going and I have to do my best to make it happen."

Throughout the years, Cynthia has gone from admiring the elegant pieces in a giant store basement to owning her own showcase of wooden beauty. It may seem as though the hardworking woman can finally sit back and bask in the glory of her family's ultimate success, but that's not something she's willing to do. "I don't think I've ever reached that level. I'm still working at it," she says. "Every day, I'm still trying to do the best job I can do. I've often said the saddest day of my life will be the day I stop making mistakes, because then I'm not learning anymore."

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