

Pieces of Heaven

ABOUT A WEEK AGO, A NOTICE ARRIVED IN THE MAIL THAT A REAL estate broker in the desert near Palm Springs named Alice Beckman Cannon had passed on. She was an older woman and had been ill for some time. Plus, I had not seen her in at least five years, but still I felt deeply saddened when I got the note and here's why.

Maybe in the winter of 2003, my wife and I were vacationing in La Quinta, which is near Palm Springs. We loved the climate and long before had owned a small condo in the desert, so we decided to look for a home in that area, generally called The Coachella Valley.

We were given the name of a real estate agent, Alice Beckman Cannon, by a friend. We called her and soon I was out looking at homes. My wife refuses to look at real estate, so I did it. I told Alice that I wanted to live at Thunderbird, a club where Gerald Ford then lived. She looked doubtful but showed me a modest home there. She told me in a discreet way that I would not be happy at Thunderbird, which was a polite way of saying there were no Jews, or almost no Jews there.

I asked her for a club that had about an even mixture of Jews and Christians. She immediately showed me homes in a place called Morningside Country Club (or "The Club at Morningside"). I liked them and loved the club but it took about 18 months of looking to find the perfect home.

Then one day, while house hunting with my pal Peggy Morse, we found it. House Beautiful. It was literally my dream house: bright, with spectacular views (I had asked for the best view in the desert and she came close), furnished and decorated precisely the way my wife and I liked it, with a huge real Lichtenstein and Mexican paver tile floors. By then, it was the peak of the market, but we bought it, even paying extra for a few pieces of art that the owners had planned to sell separately.

The day escrow closed, I just lay on a couch in the living room, looked out at the swimming pool, the golf course, the palms trees, the mountains and the blue sky, and felt great. At age 60, I had found a little bit of paradise in the desert, where the breezes are perfection. I don't care that it's gone down in value since the crash. I am not a speculator.

I could not possibly have done it without my Alice. I could not have possibly done it without the seller's agent, Pat Bush Kruse, who was totally helpful and creative and good natured.

I have owned many homes and all of them have brought me joy (except for one in Aspen, where a contractor ruined the whole experience). I have a home in Malibu, a tiny little home on a hill, and the broker who got me that home, Scott Nay, worked for literally a year to help me find it. It is a piece of heaven, with the sound of waves

all night long. Heaven. I have homes in North Idaho on a lake, and I love them beyond words. A broker up there made it happen (Chris Chambers). I have a home in Beverly Hills. It is one immense garden and my wife adores it. I could not have gotten it without a great, never-say-die real estate agent.

I have a co-op at The Watergate with a smashing view over the Potomac that I worship, and a broker got that for me. None of these is a lavish home. By the standards of wealthy people, these are modest homes. But to me and my wife, they are perfect. We could never have gotten them without brokers.

Every time I use an agent — I still have

my eyes on a place on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, in Talbot County, where my broker, Cliff Meredith, never gives up hope of making me landed gentry — I am amazed at how hard they work. To get a modest commission, they work like demons, always available around the clock.

They handle even the most minute details like inspections and the big ones like financing. They show endless patience. They are relentlessly upbeat. If I change my mind, they go along with my moods.

They do all of this for sums which, on an hourly basis, are extremely reasonable, especially noting how many deals fall through.

When the market peaks, they work to exhaustion. When the market is slow, they live in privation and fear.

They need to be diplomat, design expert, financier, psychologist, surrogate parent, often surrogate spouse.

And they get precious little recognition. Here is some now. We will miss you, Alice Beckman Cannon, and I salute you, the people who put roofs over our heads and make us feel as if we have found a home — or homes — in paradise. □

