



The Hardines' home is located just north of Alexandria.



Contributed photos

Richard Hardine and his wife, Karen, have been living in their completely accessible home in Alexandria for the past 12 years.

Aging in place a possibility for everyone

By Annie Harman
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According to a survey done by AARP in 2011, the number of homeowners who prefer to age in place is on an incline. This is specifically referring to the generation of baby boomers.

Essentially, aging in place means a person would prefer to stay in their home as long as possible, as opposed to going into a nursing home in the future. The problem is that many homes aren't properly designed and structured to accommodate wheelchairs, walkers, physical limitations and other factors that come with old age and disabilities.

That's most homes. Richard and Karen Har-

dine's home, however, is quite the opposite.

The Hardines' 2,500-square-foot home is located north of Alexandria. It is beautiful, comfortable, but most importantly, it is totally accessible.

Having his mobility affected by bulbar polio, Hardine's been living with progressive muscular weakness. This led Har-

dine and his wife to relocate from their Lake Ida home 12 years ago to a more accessible home, which they built with a team from Ringdahl Architects.

The Hardines now live in a universal totally accessible home, or UTAH. It includes pathways that go around the house to every entrance, hardwood floors and wide spaces, making it easy for a wheelchair to get around.

This was not the Hardines' and associate Paul Ringdahl's first UTAH house, though. About 20 years ago, the team built the first completely accessible home in Minnesota, near Voyager Elementary School in Alexandria.

"I'm in no way an expert," said Hardine. "I just have ideas, and it's easier to experiment on my own house."

UTAH houses involve a lot of elements that Hardine would call common sense, including wider doors, no stairs, rocker switches, and having everything someone would need on the ground floor of their home, such as bathroom, master bedroom and kitchen. The key details, though, depend on each individual.

"Each disability is different," said Hardine. "They can do and sense different things, and can't do and can't sense different things."

This leads to different elements being necessary in a home. For example, Hardine used a device

that alerts the homeowner when the shower temperature is appropriate for someone who has multiple sclerosis (MS).

As the MS progresses, the individual has a difficult time identifying cold or hot water. Such a device would make a sound or produce a light when the temperature was warm enough not to make the individual sick, but not so hot whereas it would burn them.

"It's all about assessing the individual, the disability and the progressions of the disability," Hardine said.

When Hardine and Ringdahl started this process in residential construction 20 years ago, Hardine said it may have

been a bit before their time.

"People just weren't getting it," Hardine said. "The older generation was unsure how to age in place." He believes that the baby boomer generation watched their parents struggle with getting around their inaccessible homes, leading them to want to make different choices.

"They don't want to just live in their homes until they can't get around and have to go to a nursing home," said Hardine. "They need to bite the bullet, swallow their pride and recognize that someday they won't be able to do certain things."

While no one can avoid aging, it is completely pos-

sible to make or build a home that will be accessible regardless of future mobility and capability.

Hardine says that the most important part of a UTAH house is that it's made for people with handicaps, but it doesn't look it. This retains and improves both the value and equity of the home.

Hardine's business, Infinity Development, works with planning and construction of homes. He specializes in accessible, adaptable and universal design that can allow anyone to age in place, wherever that place may be.



A kitchen island was converted into a wheelchair accessible sink and counter, allowing Richard to continue to enjoy cooking and "supervising" his wife.



The Hardines' living room allows for Richard to interact and be social with company, something Richard says is important to all people.



This shower is proof that even a handicap shower can still be beautiful and add character and value to a home.



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