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# the BEAUTY of Universal DESIGN

Wide doors, lack of raised thresholds and lower countertops are just some of the features of this totally accessible home.

TEXT NANCY LEASMAN • PHOTOGRAPHY BRYAN WENDLAND



**R**ichard Hardine likes everything about Minnesota, from the change of seasons to hot dish. He especially likes the totally accessible home north of Alexandria that he shares with his wife, Karen.

Richard, whose mobility was affected by bulbar polio the year after he was born in 1950, understands accessibility issues better than nearly anyone. With residual effects of progressive muscular weakness, he has more recently found that using a wheelchair works better than struggling with canes or other ambulatory supports.

At the onset, it's important to understand terms associated with accessibility.

Accessible design conforms to mandatory requirements which vary widely but generally result in fixed features which are permanent and noticeable. These include: wide doors, lower countertops, bathroom adaptations, altered switch and control locations, absence of steps and stairs and wider pathways.

Adaptable design allows for the omission or concealment of some features of accessibility until needed. Wide doors, no steps, knee spaces, switch and control locations and other features are built in,

## *Hardines' Alexandria home lacks nothing in character, style*

The knowledge gained in building two previous homes adapted for accessibility, as well as his association with architect Paul Ringdahl of Ringdahl Architects in Alexandria, has created a thoroughly thought-out floor plan for his own home and a wealth of information to share with other future home owners who require similar considerations because of their own physical limitations.

Richard, who has a master's degree in marketing and management, acts as a construction manager in his own firm, Infinity Development, and works in association with Ringdahl Architects.

but other adaptations can be added as necessary. These dwellings can look the same as others and be matched to individual needs when occupied.

Universal design creates dwellings that have been carefully thought out and are totally accessible throughout the range of human abilities across a lifetime. The principles of universal design produce homes that are beautiful and functional, allowing access by anyone, regardless of physical capability.

The Hardine home is a perfect example. From the garage door inward, all facets of this one-story English country



RICHARD DEMONSTRATES SOME OF THE ACCESSIBILITY FEATURES OF HIS HOME, SUCH AS THE LOWERED COUNTERTOP IN THE KITCHEN, CONTROL PANELS AND LIGHT SWITCHES THAT ARE WITHIN REACH AND HIS CUSTOMIZED ROLL-IN DESK IN THE OFFICE, FACING PAGE. BELOW RIGHT ARE TWO VIEWS OF THE WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE MASTER BATHROOM.



cottage home have been carefully considered. Richard rolls to the walk-in garage door, opens it and the resident black Labrador retriever, Sam, gallops out and across the yard. Richard points out the absence of a raised threshold. "All five doors are at grade," he says, which means that a wheelchair rolls easily into the garage or in and out of the other doors that are all connected with a level brick walkway.

Properly engineered slopes and 18 inches of flashing prevent water problems. Levered handles instead of knobs on the doors make for easy opening. It also means that Sam has mastered door opening and can let himself in and out.

A carpeted path extends from the entry door of the garage to the inner door. This carpet absorbs water and prevents slipping. It eases the transfer from wheelchair to vehicle and vehicle to wheelchair. One end of the garage accommodates Richard's workshop, which has a lowered work bench and scaled down tools for easier handling. The home's central vacuum system's canister as well as the water conditioner are also in the garage, allowing Richard access to them. The washer and dryer are just inside the door as well as a fold-down ironing board, "should Karen ever allow me to iron," laughs Richard.

A roll-in pantry, just off the kitchen, stores staples on open shelves, with those Richard is more inclined to use on the lower ones. Both Richard and Karen love to cook, and he appreciates the 30-inch part of the dual height counter top and the

small prep sink of the room's island when he's slicing and dicing vegetables for Oriental cooking. The buff-colored family cat, one of three resident felines, also likes the small sink and positions itself in the cozy basin as the sun tracks across the kitchen.

An indented space under the main sink allows Richard to roll up close. A toaster on a pull-out shelf and a bread drawer make for quick breakfasts. The oven has a conventional door, exhibiting Richard's failure in talking Karen into a side opening door which would make oven use easier for him. He minds less the fact that he can't get the wheelchair into the proper position to clean the oven. The black counter tops and knobs on white cabinets are key components in a universally designed home. The color contrast allows for greater visibility.

Lower light switches and higher electric outlets throughout the house make for easier use, as do three-foot-wide doors, four-foot hallways and additional space to maneuver. Roll-out shelves make storage a breeze from kitchen to office.

"The Brazilian cherry floors with a baked-on aluminum oxide finish are 2 1/2 times harder than maple," points out Richard, making them resistant to dog paws as well as wheelchairs.

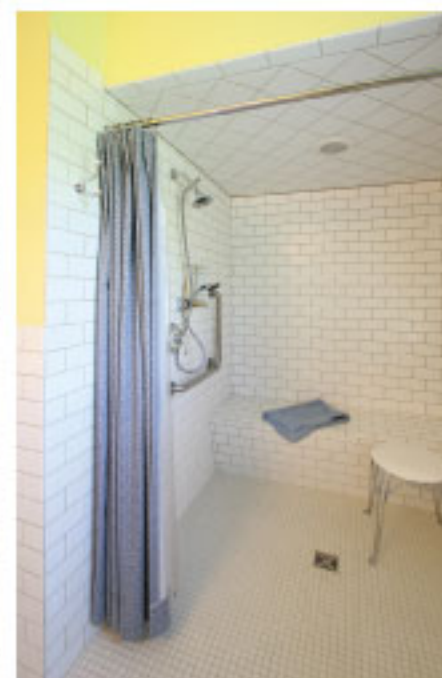
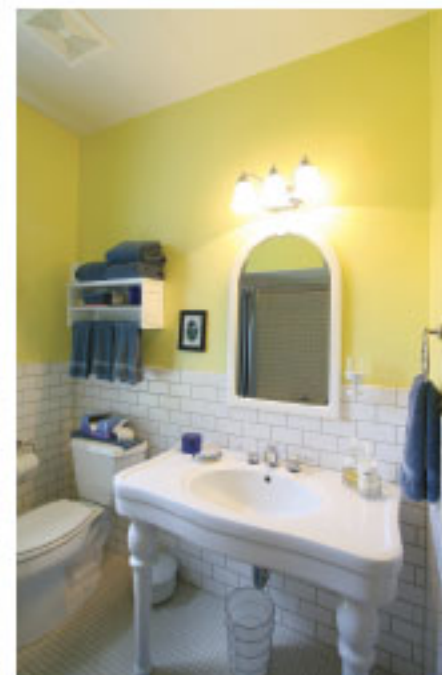
The selection of durable materials is only one consideration of a well-thought-out design. "All universal design features develop with each client as we establish the needs," says Paul Ringdahl, who has 29 years of experience, the last 19 in Alexandria. Paul's association with Richard, as well as an upsurge in aging baby boomers building homes they can live in the rest of their lives, has sensitized both of them to the seven principles of universal design.

These are defined as: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error (minimizing hazards), low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use. Applying these principles, listening carefully and planning thoughtfully produces functionally efficient homes.

It seems that they've thought of

everything. The tile floor in the Hardines' guest bathroom slopes to the floor drain, making a shower door or curtain unnecessary. A built-in tiled bench slopes slightly, too. "The tile installer was an artist," says Richard. The master bath has a bath lift to assist transfer into the tub, and the tub is the same height as a wheelchair. The vanity is set at 30 inches and is only 20 inches front to back to allow easier reach of the faucet.

The master bedroom has a centrally located walk-in closet open to the room.





The chicken coop, above left, and the tea house, above right, are two of the three outbuildings that are accessible by paver walkways. Below, the Hardines utilized boulders in much of their landscaping. Two views of the master bedroom, facing page, showcase some of the Hardines' love of antiques, evident throughout much of the home.



An adjacent stack of cubbies makes easy, convenient and reachable storage for Levis, T-shirts and shoes. "We installed extra blocking three feet out in the ceiling to tie into if we need to put a lift over the bed; around the showers, too, for hand railing and grab bars," explains Richard as examples of planning ahead for future needs.

Karen and Richard agree the sunroom is their favorite room of the house. Formerly an entry, it became a sunroom with the installation of thermal pane windows and is warm year round. The cats and Sam think it's their napping room. Karen likes to relax there after a busy day in her job as an occupational therapist.

Karen also loves the small tea house, a pineapple relief carving over the door, sitting just across the yard. It's one of three outbuildings, all accessible by the walkways. The other two are a chicken coop complete with laying hens and a potting shed.

While offering the utmost in accessibility, the Hardine home hasn't given up character or style in exchange for usability. Nor was it a costly alternative to a conventional home. Richard says a new custom home is more economical than remodeling and adding adaptive features to an existing home.

Paul agrees. "There really is no net add to the cost; just a difference in design. It's much harder to fix later rather than building for accessibility in the first place. You can't make hallways

wider. You have to take space from one area to adapt another," he knows from the adaptive remodeling projects he has taken on.

Richard makes a list of special features which can be built into new homes: installation of oxygen outlets in walls to omit snaking oxygen hoses, deeper and wider bathtubs, higher toilets, pull-down shelves, battery charging cubbies for electric carts, ventilation systems, piping gas to grills to negate the need for hauling gas tanks, positioning rooms for the best use of natural light, sound-deadening sheetrock for light sleepers, tightly woven carpets with thin pads for easier ambulation or wheelchair access, thermostatic heat adjustments on water faucets, outdoor raised beds for gardening, and the list goes on. "We look for a better way with the same function," Richard says of the challenges of keeping costs in check.

While the Hardine home has a full basement, Richard doesn't concern himself with what happens there. Space in the master bedroom could be used for installation of a man lift, as has been done in some homes. Richard would rather be outside mowing and maintaining the trails through their 20 acres of rolling hills, trees and ponds, feeding the birds and keeping Sam in check.

4

Nancy Leasman is a writer from Long Prairie.



Architect for the Richard & Karen Hardine Home



# FEATURE HOME CONTRIBUTORS

**Hardine Home**



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