

# Easy-access houses help homeowners age in place

09:41 AM CDT on Friday, May 16, 2008

An East Dallas couple who had lived in their home for 40 years suddenly faced health problems. He suffered a stroke, and she contracted Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. They assumed they would have to move to a house that looked more like a nursing home.

Then they met Bill Slease, a builder with Tapestry Custom Homes and a national advocate for accessible homes. He showed the couple how they could rework the entry to eliminate the steps. They were so excited, they decided to remodel the kitchen and baths and replace the flooring so they could continue living in the home they loved.

"Life comes at you fast," Mr. Slease says. "And life for many of the baby boomers is coming faster than they think."

When it does, their house can be "a friend or a foe," he says, depending on how accessible it is.

Mr. Slease, a former commercial mortgage banker, started developing small tracts of land in the 1990s. By the turn of the century, he was building homes.

At a national homebuilders' conference, his wife, Judy, discovered a GE display that arranged kitchen appliances that were accessible for all people, regardless of their physical abilities. Mr. Slease also read a survey that concluded that most people, as they age, would prefer to stay in their own homes.

"I jumped on it," he says. He was the second builder in North Texas to get his certificate as a specialist in building houses for people who want to age in place.

Since then, he has built or remodeled about 25 homes to make them more accessible. In 2005, he also built his own house in McKinney incorporating everything he and Ms. Slease had learned.

The Sleases use their home partly as a laboratory to test new products and concepts and partly as a model to teach other builders and consumers how to build homes that are accessible to anyone, regardless of their physical abilities.

"Our job is to stay on top of what's new," Ms. Slease says.

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Photo by Aeneas Ford  
Judy and Bill Slease's McKinney home was built to incorporate features that are accessible to anyone, regardless of their physical abilities. Mr. Slease is a national advocate for accessible homes.

They like to talk about wider doors (36 inches), bigger baths, more sturdy flooring and appliances that are more accessible, like elevated dishwashers or lower ovens. And they talk about how to build a home that can adapt – how to design a home for an elevator that might be installed years later.

But the Sleases hear from many people who are afraid that an accessible house means it looks like a nursing home.

The Sleases' house doesn't have that look. At a dinner party recently, guests were impressed that the downstairs bath was attractive and spacious. It has wheelchair-accessible, yet attractive sinks, shower and tub. The grab bars are made of decorative pewter.

The Sleases' home was the first in Texas certified by the EasyLiving Home program, which is funded by the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities.

Making a house easier to live in, according to the Sleases, is less dependent on money than on planning. Houses today are built the way they are mostly because of tradition. "We are still building houses the way we did 40 years ago," Mr. Slease says.

For example, why are electrical outlets installed a few inches off the baseboard, rather than a foot higher where they would be easier for everyone to use – not just someone who has trouble bending over?

Ms. Slease's sister had seen how easy it is to load a dishwasher that is 6 inches higher than normal. But when building her new house, her designer and builder objected because they would have to rework the marble countertop. "They didn't know my sister," Ms. Slease says. "She got her way."

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