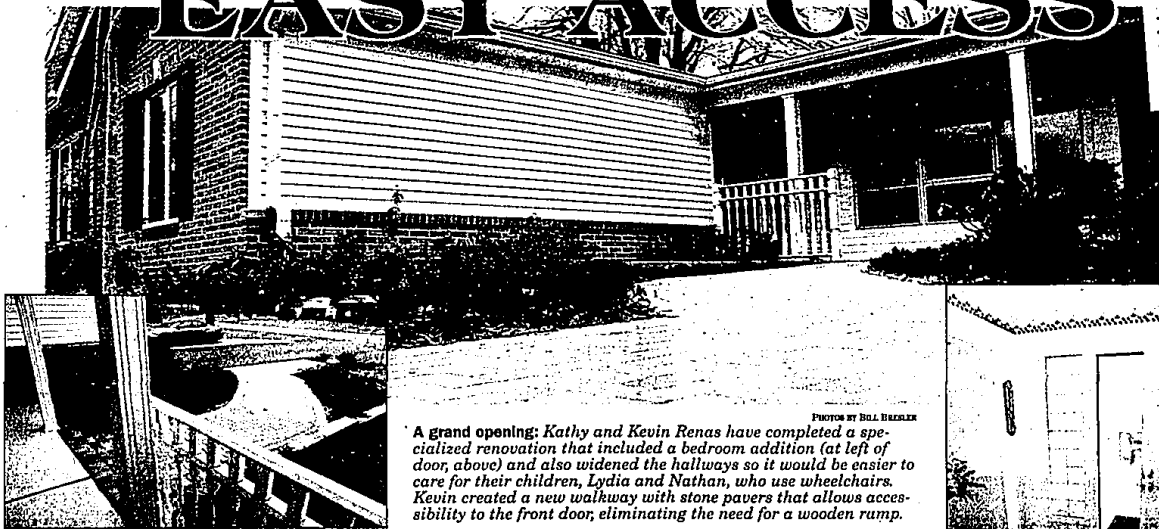
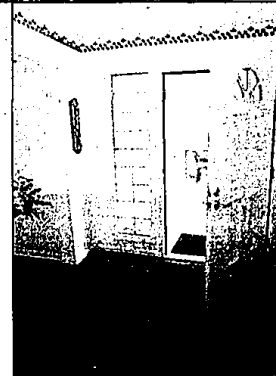


EASY ACCESS



A grand opening: Kathy and Kevin Renas have completed a specialized renovation that included a bedroom addition (at left of door, above) and also widened the hallways so it would be easier to care for their children, Lydia and Nathan, who use wheelchairs. Kevin created a new walkway with stone pavers that allows accessibility to the front door, eliminating the need for a wooden ramp.



Couple tackles specialized renovation for their children

BY KEN ABRAMCZYK
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Nine years ago Kathy and Kevin Renas moved to Farmington Hills because they wanted better schools for their children and they liked the sense of community.

But the 1,600 square-foot ranch home didn't suit their family's needs.

"The old homes don't really accommodate for wheelchairs," Kevin said.

Their two children, Lydia, 12, and Nathan, 14, sit in wheelchairs. Lydia, a student at Warner Middle School, has cerebral palsy. Nathan, 14, who is considered severely multiply impaired, attends Cloverdale Development Center in Farmington Hills.

Kevin and Kathy expanded their home to make it easier to care for Lydia and Nathan. "You just don't want obstacles in the way," said Kevin.

They did their research, and found that with a little persistence, and elbow grease, you can tackle a specialized renovation, and stay within a budget.

Getting started

First they received three estimates from contractors, ranging from \$85,000 to \$96,000. "We just didn't have that much to spend on it," Kevin said.

So in December 1998, Kevin and Kathy rolled up their sleeves. They drew up plans, then visited Farmington Hills architect Carl Gaiser. "He was very helpful," Kevin said. "He laid out the bathroom a little differently with a second door."

Kevin contracted the work to subcontractors and completed some of the work himself with assistance from co-workers and Kathy's father, Huston Prall, a retired Ford engineer. After notifying neighbors of his intentions, and obtaining variances from the city to expand the home toward the street, Kevin went to work.

Renas removed a brick wall from the south side of the house, and two trees, poured a concrete foundation in front of the house, opened up the hallways, enlarged the bathrooms and added two new bedrooms. Meanwhile, the family of four "relocated" within the house.

Lydia's room was to become an accessible bathroom, so Lydia slept in the living room. Nathan remained in his old bedroom (today that's a computer/office room) and Kevin and Karen slept in the family room. The renovations presented some inconveniences. Nathan was sometimes bothered by project noise, Kathy said.

They expanded an adjacent hallway by moving the south wall. They widened several doorways from the standard 36 inches to 42 inches. Renas also installed four solid core doors, including three interior ones.

Easy and accessible

The bathroom can be characterized as a textbook example of how a bathroom can be created for wheelchair-bound individuals while keeping the additional open space aesthetically pleasing.

The sink has no cabinet under it and is lower in height than usual so Lydia can sit close to wash or use a mirror. Drawers line the left side of the sink for convenience. (Lydia is left-handed).

Ceiling tracks in the bathroom allow the parents to lift

their children out of their wheelchairs. Prefabricated shower doors fold open on two different levels.

"We can open the top and leave the bottom closed so we don't get wet (during showers for the children)," said Kevin.

Of course, plumbing was required on the converted bedroom, a job that also was contracted out. Kevin installed "blocking" or 2-by-8 or 2-by-10 pieces cut to fit in between the studs.

"Walls always have 16 inches between studs, but when you want to put in grab bars, they don't come in a 16-inch length (for installation purposes)," Kevin said. That blocking was installed around the bathroom to allow them to place the grab bars in any location they wanted.

Kevin tiled the bathroom himself using information from The Tile Shop in Farmington Hills.

Lydia and Nathan's new bedrooms on the south side of the street are designed for easy wheelchair access. Kevin and Kathy's bedroom sits just beyond the expanded bathroom. Nathan's new room is about 18 1/2 feet by 14 feet. That additional room helps the Renases and a nurse they hired to care for Nathan.

Added support

Light switches were lowered, and wall outlets raised during installation for Lydia's convenience.

Lydia's wheelchair weighs between 325 to 350 pounds. "I was concerned about the support of the floor," Kevin said. But he worked with the rough carpenter in doubling every other floor joist for added support.

The Renases purchased commercial grade nylon carpeting with no pad for Lydia's room, similar to what they had installed in the family room. "With a pad, my daughter's wheelchair would have torn it up bad," Kevin said.

They hired subcontractors to complete rough carpentry, electrical, plumbing, heating and roofing, concrete and drywall jobs. Kevin did some finish carpentry himself, such as moldings and baseboards, along with the bathroom tile work and landscaping and pavers outside.

The finishing touches included tumbled stone brick pavers laid by Kevin for a natural flowing wheelchair access — eliminating the need for a wooden ramp — to enter the front door.

The Renases experienced little frustration, Kevin said, which was "amazing." He kept a list of projects, subcontractors and costs, checking them off as they were completed. "I was hoping to have a builder, so I wouldn't have the headaches," said Kevin. "But I didn't have a significant number of problems. I was astounded."

Kevin appreciates the help he received from Kathy's father and Tom Martin, a friend of Kevin's, who helped install the solid core doors.

When the Renases finished, the total cost was \$82,000. Not a small chunk of change, but when compared to the bids, a significant savings.

"I knew some of the basics on how a house went together," Kevin said. "It was a lot of work and a lot of time but we saved a lot of money."

Many of the contractors were gracious and helpful, knowing that they were helping children with disabilities, Kevin said.

"We had to get a variance to be closer to the lot line, and the city was very good about that," said Kevin. Neighbors were notified, and Kevin put stakes in the yard to show them what they were doing. "The neighbors were terrific," Kevin said.

Life is a little easier for them with the wide open space.

"It makes a big difference with the right layout," Kevin said. "Lydia likes the big room and her own space."

"For us, it makes the care incredibly easy."



Accessible: The bathroom's enlarged shower area folding shower doors so Kathy and Kevin Renas can remain outside and dry when assisting their children during showers.



Down the hall: Kathy Renas stands in the widened doorway of daughter Lydia's room adjacent to a hallway built wider than the standard 36 inches.

MARTY FIGLEY

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An old pond in north Farmington was the source of community activity in the early 20th Century. See Vintage Farmington.

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