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Ranch house accessibility solution seamlessly blends with re-designed front elevation

By John Byrd Special to the Fairfax County Times Jul 14, 2016



Scooter-access between the house and the front walk had previously depended on portable ramps which were unfolded in the morning and removed at night.

PHOTOS COURTESY GLICKMAN DESIGN BUILD

A well-executed universal design arouses our hope that a better world is not only possible, but within our grasp. Certainly the intention is to include persons with mobility challenges and it follows that inclusive design is not just an enhancement for one, but for everyone.

"The thinking in our culture has really evolved on this issue," observes accessibility design expert Russ Glickman. "It is much more common today to see a special needs solution so perfectly rationalized that it improves how the house functions, and how it looks."

Of course, as a practical matter, finding a skilled change-agent who gets the vision can be difficult, if not outright vexing. Just ask Springfield homeowner Grace Cassidy.

Cassidy and husband Chris have occupied a two-level brick ranch near Lake Accotink for some 17 years. Son Chris, who has now completed graduate studies at American University, was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy when he was not quite three years old. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to a pretty ranch house on a corner lot with a sloping hill. A second child was born. Life went on, hampered only by occasional struggles in moving Chris's scooter as he got older. Gradually, Chris's natural drive for independence became a factor. To help him get from the front of the house to sidewalk, for instance, the family deployed a fold-out ramp which they re-folded and removed at the end of the day.

As Chris became more accustomed to getting around on his own, the Cassidys stepped up their search for ways to better retrofit the house.

"Finding someone who understood our requirements turned out to be a real problem," Cassidy recalls. "The contractors we discussed our needs with either didn't know what they were doing, or just turned us down outright. That's when I recognized that the solution we wanted was still considered pretty specialized."

Enter Russ Glickman, founder of Glickman Design Build. By turns, what is particularly "specialized" about services provided by this veteran remodeler is that he's learned much of his craft by care-giving for his son, Michael, who was born with cerebral palsy.

"I've been designing and remodeling homes for over 30 years," Glickman says. "About 15 years ago I really immersed myself in mastering about a dozen special-needs building technologies. It's an evolving discipline that embraces very particular technologies and applications."

Glickman's search eventually led to certifications in Aging in Place (CAPS), Environmental Access (CEAC) & Green Building (GAOP). He is also a Master Certified Remodeler (MCR). For Cassidy, though, the important fact was that Glickman came forward with practical ideas.

"Russ showed us how we could re-design our home's front elevation so that it would help Chris, and also accommodate a family outdoor play area and enhanced curb appeal," Cassidy recalls. "I began to see that there is no reason why a universal design must look like it was created for handicapped needs."

That said, the project's greatest difficulties were inherent to the site itself. The plan called for a pathway that would enable Chris to easily get from the front door to a waiting school bus at the foot of the driveway one level below. Since the existing downward path consisted of a series of staircases and walkways built along a rapidly-deteriorating brick retaining wall, the feasibility issues seemed daunting.

"The site preparation component was a real challenge," Glickman says. "We had to cultivate the grade so the scooter can handle it easily. This entailed a certain amount of earth-moving and re-compaction, which we secured with a two-part retaining wall that now figures into the new landscaping plan."

The newly paved side walkway, in fact, extends some 90 feet from the front door to the driveway, never rising faster than one inch per foot.

Better yet, the re-designed front elevation and decking has been a boon for the entire family.

The former front porch has been replaced by an L-shaped veranda that wraps the home's northwest corner as it segues to an outdoor grilling deck.

Surrounded by mature trees and recently completed landscaping, the outdoor living space is elegant and private.

To assure traction and durability, Glickman specified Fiberon decking. For atmosphere, the railing caps are fitted with Azek night lighting which creates a pretty effect on a warm night when the family gathers for a cook-out.

"The greatest pleasure for me now is how well this works for Chris," Grace says.

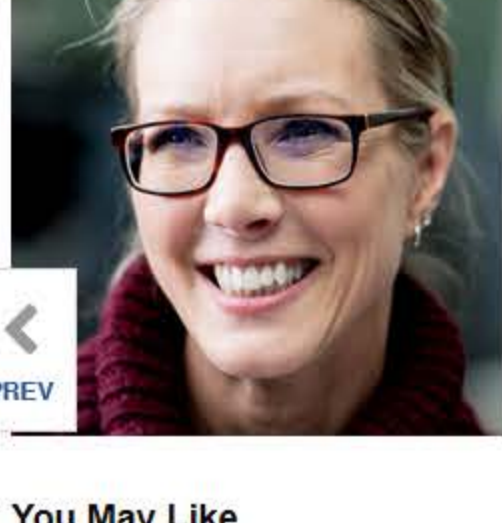
"When I see him heading off to catch a ride, or coming up the hill on his own, it's the complete fulfillment of everything we'd hoped for."

Glickman periodically offers workshops on accessible living and Aging-In-Place topics. He also provides expert testimony in court cases involving accessibility compliance, and serves on the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities. For information visit www.GlickmanDesignBuild.com, or call 301-444-4663

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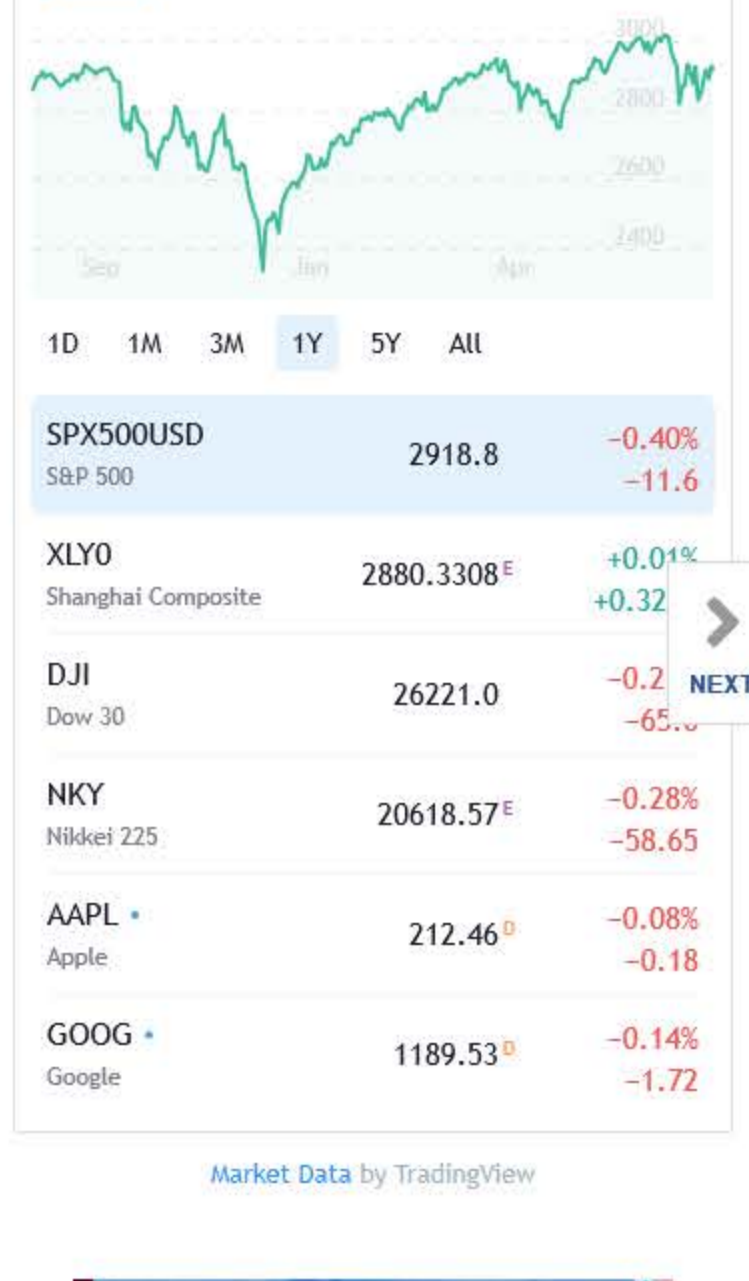
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