

St. Anthony Couple Determined to Stay in Home

Schroeder's undertake major renovations to make house handicap accessible.
Stephanie Ariganello, St. Anthony Bulletin, October 16, 2002

Ann and Mike Schroeder refused to give up their home in St. Anthony.

In a large dwelling on 36th Avenue N.E., they are living like college students. The refrigerator, bed, piano, hanging clothes and main living area are all arranged in a front room of the house. They have survived on only half a bathroom, taking showers, said Ann, at the club.

The living situation is only temporary.

The couple has holed up in the front room since June while their house undergoes major renovations.

They say the changes were necessary in order to stay in their home.

In 1995 Mike was diagnosed with primary lateral sclerosis. It is a progressive degenerative nerve disease that claims the use of the victim's arms, legs, and tongue.

"Mike is 59 now," said Anne. "We're not old, we're disabled. We're continuing to live our lives, but how do we do that? We're not ready to shrivel up and die yet."

The answer was to change some things around the house, allowing for more freedom and mobility. As Ann put it, they had a St. Anthony problem and came up with a St. Anthony solution.

The Schroeder's explained that after weighing their options – a nursing home versus staying at home – the answer was clear. They figured five or six years in a nursing home would end up costing about the same amount of money house renovations would.

Next came the matter of how and what to change in their home. The first option was to add on to an already existing room to make a large living area for Mike.

"Then I would have been a captive on the first floor," explained Mike. "We thought about what we might do. We looked into those chairs along the stairs – that would have been okay without progressive symptoms. But if things progress, I would need a full-time caregiver's help. We don't know where I'll be in a year or two. Worst-case, I could be a quadriplegic."

So the Schroeder's dug in, hired a contractor and a disabilities design consultant, and began tearing apart doorways and floors.

They chose Mark Van Pater of MVP Construction to do the renovations, even though he had no previous experience working on exclusively disability-related remodeling.

“That’s what I mean – we came up with a St. Anthony solution,” said Ann. “He lives right across the street from us. He’s been just wonderful to work with. During the summer his kids would come over and sell lemonade to the crew.”

Since remodeling, the Schroeder’s have added an elevator that hits the upstairs, main level, garage and basement. They also built a roll-in shower connected to Mike’s room; installed a ceiling-mounted track system to assist movement in the future; handicapped toilet, which are elevated and surrounded by grab bars; and motion sensor lights that turn on without a switch.

Van Peter said there was little difference in making the house handicapped accessible when compared to a standard renovation.

“Adding the elevator was obviously different than most houses get,” he said. “The only thing we really had to pay special attention to was the height differences between rooms.”

In the basement, the Schroeder’s have a special whirlpool tub. The ceiling-mounted track system has also been installed in the hot tub room.

The doorways have been widened to accommodate a wheelchair and all the carpet padding has been removed to create a smooth, uniform floor throughout the house.

From the outside of the home, one could never tell the changes that have been made.

The Schroeder’s encountered many obscure changes they hadn’t previously thought about. For example, people in wheelchairs need extended, customized sinks with recessed plumbing for leg clearance, and more room in hallways for a turning radius.

The couple had assistance from Jane Hampton of Accessibility Design, a disability consultant, who had the experience and knowledge necessary to complete the project.

Mike and Ann will shake off their college-style living at the end of the month, when the remodeling is scheduled to be completed. The approximate cost of the construction is _____.

There are about 1,000 people in the United States with PLS, which strikes randomly, most often during middle-age. According to the Schroeder's, it is in the same arena as Lou Gherig's Disease.

There is no treatment and no cure.

"We'd like to get rid of it," said Ann with Mike nodding in agreement.

Mike, a computer programmer, recently went on disability after breaking his wrist. He maneuvers around with the help of a walker. His speech is slightly encumbered. Since the nature of the disease is progressive, the future is uncertain for the Schroeder's. The renovations are a pre-emptive strike back.