

## Helping disabled live freely

### **Sandra Thompson wanted a house to accommodate her disability and allow full independence**

May 05, 2007

**TRACY HANES**  
TORONTO STAR

By the time Sandra Thompson arrived at Howard Sher's office last year, her patience was wearing thin.

The Bluevale, Ont., woman had spent three years looking for her dream home, to no avail. Thompson, 38, who has been in a wheelchair since she contracted spinal meningitis at age 4, wanted a house to accommodate her disability and allow her full independence. But she couldn't find suitable housing; the cost of retrofitting a resale home was excessive and some new home builders were reluctant to build one for her.

"She presented herself as a very frustrated home-buying prospect who outlined how hard it was to get her needs met," recalls Sher, executive vice-president of Quality Homes.

Quality produces factory-built houses at its Kenilworth site, north of Guelph, and has models and sales offices in Grimsby and Cookstown. But unlike some of the others Thompson approached, Sher was a willing listener.

"About 10 minutes into the conversation, he said, 'I don't know how we cannot do this,'" Thompson recalls.

The gist of that conversation came to fruition in mid-April at Quality's Kenilworth site with the launch of a new 3,000-square-foot model home showcasing Liberty Series features – which allow barrier-free living and can be incorporated into any Quality floor plan.

Thompson has been instrumental in the development of the model and its features, doing research on products, making suggestions and training Quality staff on how to deal with disabled clients, while she continued to work full-time at her job with the Commissioner/Medical Officer of Health for Waterloo Region.

"Sandra has been really stellar in showing us the light," Sher says. "I think we're blazing a new trail here."

While some builders have provided aging-in-place and accessibility features at projects catering to the retiree market, most production builders don't offer them. (Aging in place refers to allowing people to continue to live in their homes safely and independently as they grow older and their physical abilities or health decline.)

However, a few builders – including Quality, Monarch and RegalCraft Homes – are taking the initiative. Two months ago, Monarch started making the features available for selected home designs at all of its GTA sites. RegalCraft will also facilitate accessibility at its projects, such as Wismer Commons in Markham, as it has done for Silvana Helliwell, 43. She has muscular dystrophy and has been in a wheelchair since age 16.

Quality's model Graystone estate home is outfitted with an extensive range of barrier-free

features, including wider doorways, lowered thresholds, lowered and two-tiered counters, overhead cupboards with a motorized mechanism which lowers them, wheel-in stove, built-in wall oven and microwave, grab bars, wheel-in shower, raised sink and tub, lower light switches and more.

"We were already catering to this market since the company's inception, but we'd never packaged or labelled it before and we didn't realize how many homes we had done with some of these features until we sat down and looked at the numbers," Sher says. "Empty nesters who are building a new home don't want to move in five or 10 years if they become ill or disabled. And the market is broad, because there are able-bodied people out there who are taking care of people with disabilities who need homes like this."

Sher says the extra cost of many of the features is minimal – for example, he says it's not difficult to incorporate wider hallways and doors or allow for lower light switches or built-in ovens in the planning stage. As well, thermostats and levered door handles and faucets don't add cost.

The features that are costly are the raising and lowering mechanisms inside upper cabinets, wheel-in showers, walk-in tubs and elevators and lifts.

Sher purposely chose a large estate model to highlight the features because he wanted "to make sure there were no misconceptions about this segment of the home-buying public."

What Sher is referring to is something Thompson has encountered in real life – the assumption that disabled people don't have the financial means to own a home or that the houses they buy compromise on appeal or size.

"I've been asked how someone in a wheelchair can afford a house," Thompson recalls. "Well, I can. And this model will show that a new house can incorporate features for the disabled without having to compromise on style or design. It's stunning."

Now that she's helped Quality launch the Liberty Series, Thompson will concentrate on finalizing the design for her own home, to be built on a cul-de-sac lot in Listowel.

When she was a child, her father was able to renovate the family home for accessibility, but Thompson says there were still issues, such as lack of turning radius in the bathroom and a kitchen not ideally suited to a disabled person. Even when she lived in rental properties touted as "accessible," she faced similar problems.

Thompson, who has a passion for cooking and entertaining, says the kitchen in her 1,800-square-foot home will be her big splurge. She'll also have wide doorways and hallways, lower thresholds and a ramp from the garage to the house.

One bathroom will be built to regular standards, while her ensuite will have a ceramic wheel-in shower, raised tub at the same height as her wheelchair seat with a 30.5 centimetres (12-inch) platform all around, raised toilet and wheel-under sink.

Floors will be laminate and ceramic to allow her wheelchair to roll easily; she will also have extra support put in walls to accommodate a future wheelchair lift to the full basement. Upgrades just for show include granite kitchen countertops and a cathedral ceiling in the open-concept great room.

Now at all Monarch sales offices in the GTA, disabled buyers or those who want to add aging-in-place features can choose from a comprehensive menu of features and get pricing on the spot. A select number of floor plans will be able to be adapted for accessibility; Monarch vice-president of low-rise Brian Johnston says not every new Monarch home is suitable – for instance, it could be difficult to provide access at grade level on some lots and structural issues may prevent adding the features in some designs.

Johnston says the initiative came about mainly as a result of inquiries the company was getting at its Penryn Park active adult community in Port Hope.

"There are a lot of older buyers there or empty nesters who were thinking ahead to the future," says Johnston. "We'd done it before on an ad hoc basis, but it was onerous for buyers to go through the process. This is more about responding to their needs and wants and standardizing the process. We don't perceive this as a marketing thing, but a way to be socially responsible."

The idea was the brainchild of Michael LaPlante, project manager for Penryn Park and operations manager, low-rise, for Monarch.

He says previously when a potential buyer inquired about barrier-free features, it would take a lot of time to get pricing on products or from trades, but now "we have all pricing upfront" so they can respond quickly to such queries.

"We used to get about five or six inquiries a year and it represented less than 1 per cent of our sales, but part of it was that handicapped people felt production builders weren't receptive to this," says LaPlante.

For years, Silvana Helliwell, who has spinal muscular atrophy, and her husband, David, lived in a tiny 900-square-foot home in Markham. But as the family expanded to two sons, quarters got cramped. About half a dozen years ago, Helliwell gave a production builder a deposit to build a new home, but found him reluctant to make changes she required and the cost of some features was excessive, so the deal was called off, she says.

In 2004, she went to the RegalCraft sales office for Wismer Commons and was "shocked" to see features such as an optional elevator were offered in their homes.

The Sharma family, which owns RegalCraft, not only were receptive to Helliwell's wishes, "they almost adopted me," she says.

Renka Sharma came to the house with samples for Helliwell to choose her finishes and the company called her when each stage of the home was completed, so her husband David could videotape it and show her.

"I was so involved in the process, it was like I was wearing a hard hat and part of the contractor's team," she says. "The Sharmas are real heroes ... they made my dreams come true."

The two-storey, 3,800-square-foot house has an elevator, wide doorways and hallways, hardwood floors throughout and "I can go into every nook and cranny in this house. It's totally accessible," Helliwell says. Although the island has been adapted so Helliwell can eat there, the kitchen is a standard one, as her muscular strength is too weak for her to cook.

A special hydraulic ceiling Hoyer lift system outfitted with a sling can lift her to her canopy bed; another carries her to the Jacuzzi tub, toilet or shower.

If it's sold in future, features such as the lift system can easily be removed, said Helliwell. She's not the only one in the neighbourhood interested in accessibility, she points out: Four other homes on her street have also been outfitted with service elevators.