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Overcoming Obstacles for the Physically Challenged

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From Legislation to Real Life

Some time ago, our government passed a public access law for the disabled and elderly. It is known as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It was a long time coming, but even now will be even longer before all areas of need comply to it.

One day, I had a conversation with my brother Dan about the changes this law would bring to him. He has been confined to a wheelchair for some time, due to an accident. Being "confined" is the wrong word. He said he was never "confined" to his chair because he could transfer to other chairs, his bed, and so on. According to him, his greatest feeling of "confinement" was after he got home and had to face an environment that was made for the standing position. He recalled that it made him feel frustrated, angry, and alone. It was like he was a little kid again and couldn't reach the cookie jar.

While working through this difficult period, Dan found that his brain and creativity were not directly connected to his legs. Having been a crew member in our late father's family firm, he had the background knowledge and drive to meet and break down the barrier walls set before him and to accept his challenges. He reminded me that this ADA law doesn't do any good if the people can't maneuver within their own homes or get out of them. He had a point. After that conversation, I went back in my mind to when he first got home and some of the alterations that had to be made to the house.

Overcoming Mental Barriers

The first challenge that was met and overcome was his "disability" in our eyes. Once that conclusion was reached, we could look at items in a more positive vein and meet them head on, keep the ones that were acceptable and alter others to meet his needs.

Doorways and halls were measured to see what could be done to meet the mobility requirements set forth by the measurements. Some of the doorways needed attention; the existing stops were removed. We cut them up to the doorknob height and reinstalled the upper portions only. This increased the opening slightly. However the door in the opened position still blocked two inches of the opening. This was resolved by changing the standard hinges to offset hinges allowing for a full, unobstructed opening.

Round doorknobs were changed to lever-type doorknobs. Others had to be changed to what is called a

closer blank, a lever or knob that is only on one side. Because the door was against the wall, a standard knob obstructed a 90 degree opening. In these cases, doors were held shut by magnetic cabinet latches, and opened on the opposite side by a flush ring pull.

Most light switches are reachable for adults in a sitting position. If children are involved, this obstacle can be overcome by changing the standard toggle switch to larger tip switches that merely need to be hit rather than slipped up or down. A standard toggle switch can remain if the switch plate cover is accompanied by a slide plate that is lowered to meet height requirements.

Heading For The Light, Windows

Reaching table lamp switches can prove to be dangerous. A simple in line switch can be attached to the cord without ruining the lamp. With these in-line switches, the original switch can remain in the "on" position. The in-line switch will then control the electrical current to the bulb. These same switches can be used on radios, TV's, or other items that may be placed on higher shelves.

The windows in Dan's room were also a slight problem. The shade proved to be a bit difficult. This was overcome by connecting a string to the bottom of the shade; if it snaps up beyond his reach, he can pull it down with the string.

The next challenges occurred in the bathroom. Since walls could not be moved to suit the wheelchair, other means to enlarge the area were needed. The vanity and sink were replaced with a wall-mounted sink. This allowed enough room to move around, but not for a wheelchair. This was resolved by transferring to a commode-type chair outside the bath. From there, Dan was able to pull himself into the bath via grab bars.

Once inside the bath, he could transfer to the toilet seat quite easily via a safety grab rail. The bathtub was supplied with a flip down transfer seat and safety grab bar for him. The stationary shower head was replaced with an adjustable head; the valve handles on the sink and tub fixtures were changed to lever handles.

Since Dan is a cooking nut, the next room of challenge was the kitchen. The lower base cabinets needed to be altered first. The shelves were all made to roll out like drawers with a slide system. This allowed for full exposure of everything inside the cabinet. The counter was lowered in one area. Although this eliminated only one drawer, it allowed us to lower the microwave oven so that it would be within his reach.

The sink base was also altered. The doors were removed, along with the base shelf and toe kick. This allowed him to pull his chair right up to the sink. Again, the valves were supplied with lever handles.

One drawer was altered to accept a mixing bowl to meet his "creative" cooking needs. The work island was lowered slightly by eliminating the toe kicks on the cabinets. All small appliances could be operated from that island, since it was supplied with electrical outlets.

Transition To The Outside World

The next step was to get Dan out of the house. The prime door was wide enough; however the storm door closer had to be raised to the top of the storm door.

The door threshold was altered to make a smoother transition by securing a piece of beveled siding on each side of the threshold. We constructed a ramp to increase his mobility to the rest of the outside world.

I know I covered a lot here. All of it is important. Most important, however, is to make sure that no one feels imprisoned by restriction or smothered by helping hands of loved ones. Independence is the key.

Some of the things I have covered are relatively simple to do and others may require professional assistance. If assistance is required extra care should be taken in selecting a contractor that specializes in these types of alterations. Select a firm that has a personal interest in what they are doing. They will have a better understanding in meeting your needs and most likely have better sources for the materials needed.

Dealing with problems surrounding the disabled and elderly are hard enough. Breaking down the barriers along the way to independence shouldn't have to be that hard.

We hope this information has been helpful to you! If you have any further questions, please visit our website at www.aroundyourhouse.net, or contact Jim at Around Your House.

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