

Aging in place

Couple turns Paradise Cay fixer-upper into a forever home

By **MICHELLE ASCHWALD**

maschwald@thearknewspaper.com

Gale and Renee Greisen moved from an upscale Sausalito houseboat to a waterfront Tiburon home with eventual retirement in mind, and to age in place as long as possible.

In 2008, they bought a waterfront fixer-upper in Paradise Cay and then decided to remodel and invest in design elements that would enhance their senior lifestyle.

"I knew it was not a good lifestyle for us on a houseboat," Gale, 70, says. "I also have an interesting dilemma with a younger wife who prefers not to live in a senior community."

After 10 years on the 2,000-square-foot, three-story houseboat, they moved to the 3,500-square-foot dockside home with a three-car garage and front yard.

"This house was in deplorable condition when we first saw it but had a spectacular view across the bay to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge — so we could envision potential," Renee, 57, says.

"When we built the home, we specified an elevator for future use," Gale says. "I needed it sooner than planned.

"Six months after the installation, I



JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

Gale and Renee Greisen created a first-floor guest room with a built-in armoire and a private bathroom that can later be used for an au pair or a caretaker as the couple's needs change.

was diagnosed with leukemia at age 65 and became too weak to climb stairs," he says.

Then, Renee broke some bones in her foot and next their dog required knee surgery, so they also used the elevator.

Gale has now been in remission from the cancer for a few years, and they continually upgrade their residence with attractive handicap-helpful features.

The Greisens' scenario is part of a national trend, according to a March 14 Washington Post article, "Aging-in-place gains popularity with older population." The article highlights HomeAdvisor's recently-released "Aging in Place Survey Report" that indicates 56 percent of the people who hired a professional for aging-oriented renovation projects are under the age of 65, and that seniors are looking ahead to a time

when they will be less capable but also wish to remain in their homes.

Preferred features

The top five projects in the HomeAdvisor aging-in-place survey deal with safety and functionality.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents said that they added grab bars somewhere in the home such as a bedroom, bathroom or hallway — to assist in stabilization or standing up; other completed projects included adding a ramp to the front entrance to the home, 64 percent; widening doorways, 44 percent; adding a first-floor bathroom, 35 percent; and adding lever handles, 30 percent.

The Greisens' open great room floor plan encompasses the kitchen and living room, Renee says. Throughout the residence, there are lever door handles, wide hallways and low door thresholds, which ease entry and exit to the street, garage and back deck. Renee says that the walls have been reinforced for the future installation of grab bars.

On the second floor, they built a spacious master bedroom suite, equipped with a large closet, dressing area and a deluxe bathroom, all designed for



JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

Stairs and an elevator connect the first and second floors in the Greisens' Tiburon home. The elevator is part of the later-in-life contingencies the couple built in. On the second floor, the elevator opens on the landing that leads to the master bedroom and bath.

wheelchair accessibility.

On the second floor, they built two bedrooms and a half-bathroom. The ground floor has potential living space for themselves and a future caregiver; the downstairs rooms currently serve as a home office and a guest bedroom.

“Mathematically, it can be very ex-

pensive to live in assisted-living,” Renee says. “We are lucky to have a comfortable, accessible home where we can bring in caregivers, if needed.”

The home includes customized features such as motorized window shades throughout, an easy-load washer and dryer, radiant heating, gas fireplace in-

serts, double doors to the deck, a central security and thermostat panel, a lower level microwave and convection oven and low refrigerated drawers.

The Greisens run the San Rafael-based firm Sausalito Design & Construction, Inc. and are well-versed in residences that are in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act, and they worked with Holscher Architecture in Tiburon on the footprint for their remodel.

“We don’t have children to help us in our late senior years,” Renee says. “Gale and I have always worked together as a team — we designed an enjoyable Cape Cod/Nantucket-style beach home infused with Southern California details.”

“Living here, we can still work, travel, enjoy boating and entertain,” Renee says. “Our boat is moored at the Corinthian Yacht Club, where we socialize. Our friend-base is in Marin and San Francisco.”

Aging in place

In the American Association of Retired Persons’ 2004 report “Beyond 50.05: A Report to the Nation on Livable Communities: Creating Environments for Successful Aging,” 90 percent of



The entrance to the elevator is in the foyer of the Greisens’ home.

the respondents over age 65 stated that they would prefer to remain in their home of choice as long as possible as they age.

The report stresses that housing options and design features can strongly influence a senior’s quality of life and whether they have successful aging

outcomes.

Forever on the peninsula

The Ark spoke to seven architects and builders, including the Greisens, and the majority said they have clients in the age range of 45-70 and that there is a growing interest to install elevators and to renovate or build homes with easy access features.

“For aging in place, we are the perfect examples,” says Tiburon-based interior designer Jerry Jacobs, who says he and his wife have lived on the peninsula for 30 years and are slowly renovating their home. Jacobs recommends a full bedroom and bathroom downstairs, ramps and enough space for wheelchair rotation.

“If you own a home in this area — why would you want to move?” Jacobs says. “Aging in place can be achieved without looking like an ‘old person’s home.’”

“It is hard to move out of Marin — everything is here for us,” Renee says. “I think this is our forever home.”

Contributor Michelle Aschwald has been writing for The Ark since 2006.