

Designing a home for true accessibility

Rita Marshall

FOR THE GAZETTE

MILVERTON — Sandra Thompson's home is one of several new houses on the edge of Milverton. A pleasant brick bungalow on the outside, it is spacious and colourful on the inside. Not very different, at first glance, from any of the other houses in the neighbourhood.

"It doesn't look like a disabled person's house," says Thompson, 39. "But that's the point."

The house is bright, modern and allows the Milverton resident complete independence. Thompson, who uses a wheelchair, designed her home with wide doorways, custom-raised bathroom fixtures, a wheel-in shower and two remote-controlled doors. An avid cook, she paid extra attention to the kitchen. The stove and sink are both wheelchair, while the microwave and oven are lowered, surrounded by pull-out raised cupboards. Perhaps the most impressive features are the kitchen cabinets that automatically lower themselves to counter level at the flick of a switch.

Thompson's house is the result of two

years of work with Quality Homes, a Kenilworth-based builder of custom homes and cottages. Thompson and Howard Sher, executive vice-president at Quality, created the Liberty Series, a scope of accessible features that can be incorporated into any of the company's home or cottage designs. Trained staff can advise a client of what accessible features would work best for specific needs and preferences. Wider doorways, lowered light switches and an array of assistive devices can be built in, along with the rest of the home, at Quality's production facility.

While Thompson's home was being built, another crew poured a foundation on the Milverton lot. The home was trucked in and placed on the foundation in one day. The outside brick and attached garage were completed on site. Thompson says that once a lot was secured and the design finalized, the building process took seven weeks.

Although Thompson was a key factor in the creation of the Liberty series, she is not the first or only homeowner to use them. Three other Quality homes across the province have also incorporated accessible features, and both Thompson and Sher pre-

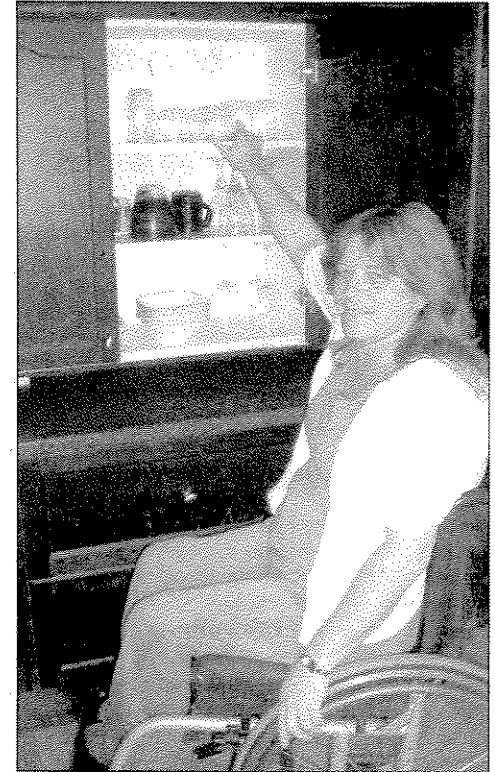
dict the market will grow.

"We saw the opportunity as enormous," said Sher. According to Statistics Canada, the largest increases in Ontario's disabled population come from the population aged 45 and older. With the considerable size of the aging Baby Boomer demographic, Thompson believes built-in accessible features, as opposed to retro-fitting an existing house, will become more and more popular.

"Soon all doorways will be wider," says Thompson. "We have to start thinking universal design, not specialized design." Sher says that levered door handles, for example, now come standard at Quality.

Thompson says that when she designed the 3,000-square-foot Liberty series model at the Quality Showroom, she wanted to show that able-bodied and disabled people could live comfortably together in the same house. She put that into practice after she ended up changing both her original location and house design to accommodate a household of herself, her partner, and occasionally three children.

"There's nothing in here that no one else could live in," she says. "It doesn't matter if you're abled, disabled, short or tall."



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Sandra Thompson reaches into her new kitchen cabinet, which lowers itself at the flick of a switch.