

Making history accessible

Old Victorian customized without losing its historical charm

By LACEY SIKORA, Contributing Reporter

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When they purchased the home in late 1998, Pam and Mark Compasio fell in love with the wrap-around front porch, pocket doors, fireplaces and built-in cabinets that typified homes built in the late 1800s. Like many homeowners in Oak Park, they planned to do some renovations to make the home their own for their growing family, but the actual redo was anything but typical. Their oldest daughter Christine has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, so they set out to make every part of the home accessible to her. With the help of Oak Park architect Frank Heitzman, they created a home that retains its historical charm while offering accessibility and safety for their daughter.

After leaving a large architecture firm in the city, Heitzman has operated in Oak Park since 1984. He is something of a specialist in Victorian homes and in making homes accessible for individuals with special needs. Initially, Heitzman and the Compasios, including 8-year-old Christine, worked to come up with an appropriate plan for the home.

According to Heitzman, the planning process was as important as the construction process.

"The design process of the home took about six months," he said. "Design is not something an architect does by himself. It's a collaborative process. It's more like taking two steps forward and two steps back. I met with the family and we went back and forth. Even at that young age, Christine had input into things."

Pam Compasio said she was pleased with the entire process.

"We had an 8-year-old child, parents, architect and contractor all contributing their ideas for the house. We were expecting our third daughter, and the entire renovation process was being filmed for a TV show called 'New Spaces.' It was a hectic time, but as a Christian family, we truly believed that if God wanted us to be here, it would all work out."

The family needed an elevator to make all four floors of the home accessible, so one major question was how to integrate the elevator into the home. According to Heitzman, many of his projects involve elevators, and while residential elevators differ widely from standard commercial elevators, they can be modified to meet each family's and home's unique needs.



Open house: The open floor plan of Christine's bedroom (top) allowed her to move freely in her wheelchair. An access door to the elevator in the kitchen blends with the aesthetic of the home.

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The elevator's exterior doors are clad in wood and blend in perfectly with the rest of the home. Heitzman added an operator system so that the doors open automatically when the elevator stops at a floor. For added safety, the elevator includes its own power system with a back-up generator and an emergency intercom system.

The third floor of the home was originally a therapy space for Christine, with its own accessible bathroom and shower. Pam noted that this space was instrumental in Christine's growth.

"The space allowed her occupational therapists, speech therapists and aides to interact with her in her everyday environment," she said. The space's open floor plan, bathroom and sitting area make it an easy conversion into a master suite.

Realtor Peggy Lechos, who is currently listing the house for F.C. Pilgrim at \$699,000, said the vintage-style tile and sink in the third-floor bathroom are indicative of the Compasios' style.

"The Compasios' love of the home's history is combined beautifully with the new conveniences. They love the old charm, like vintage tiles and sinks, and the claw foot tub, so they kept these items in the house when they could," she said. "All of the systems in the home are new though, so it functions like a modern home."

Another important part of the renovation process was redesigning the kitchen and bathrooms to accommodate Christine's wheelchair. The kitchen follows the universal design plan for accessibility. The countertops, island and desk area were all lowered so that Christine could reach them from her wheelchair. The kitchen sink, like all the bathroom sinks in the house, features an open space beneath it to accommodate a wheelchair. Throughout the home, light switches and an intercom system are also located at lower levels.

Pam noted that Heitzman and contractor Ed O'Harrow were instrumental in creating a livable, accessible home.

"Frank really saw every aspect of Christine's development and designed around it," she said. "Ed has developed a father-like relationship with Christine, and Ed and Frank often took care of so many details that we had missed."

Not surprisingly, the Compasio family has teamed up with Heitzman and O'Harrow in redesigning their new home. Although they love the "Blue House," it's time for a new stage of life for 19-year-old Christine, who is enjoying college classes and dancing with Oak Park's Momenta.

"This house has been a wonderful experience that allowed all of us to experience beauty, security and great neighbors," said Pam of the house on Ridgeland. "For Christine, this house really allowed her to experience independence.

"We're moving to a new house because it will allow Christine to have her own space, with increased independence. We'll always be connected in terms of safety, accessibility and family, but as a young lady, she is ready for more independence."

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